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**Humility and Humiliation**  
**in the Works of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett**

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2017

# **Humility and Humiliation**

## **in the Works of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett**

Albert Rick de Villiers

This thesis examines the proximity between humility and humiliation in the works of T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett. It develops a framework within which the works of the two authors are seen as complementary – though not necessarily compatible – performances of humility. This framework is literary-critical and emphasises the singularity of the work of art in nuancing the relation between humility and humiliation. Arguing both that humility impels humiliation and, conversely, that states of humiliation invite humility, this thesis traces the relation between the terms within three categories: the affective, the ethical, and the aesthetic. The authors' respective oeuvres are also read in relation to a theological tradition within which humility and humiliation are interdependent aspects of the individual subject's awareness of his/her fallibility. This view pits Eliot and Beckett against interpretations of humility that prize it as a social virtue, whether in the guise of modest behaviour or as a mode that drives communal endeavour. In drawing out these parallels and oppositions, the thesis asserts an understanding of humiliation as a self-reflexive and potentially positive ethical manoeuvre in bringing about humility. This study thus contributes a literary perspective to a small body of works which, in recent years, have proffered comparable conceptions of humiliation.

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## Abbreviations and conventions

### T. S. Eliot

CP1	<i>The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 1: Apprentice Years, 1905-1918</i>
CP2	<i>The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 2: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926</i>
CP3	<i>The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 3: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927-1929</i>
CP4	<i>The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 4: English Lion, 1930-1933</i>
CP5	<i>The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 5: Tradition and Orthodoxy, 1934-1939</i>
CP6	<i>The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition, Volume 6: The War Years, 1940-1946</i>
CPP	<i>The Complete Poems and Plays</i>
FMiC	<i>The Film of Murder in the Cathedral</i>
IMH	<i>Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917</i>
L1	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1: 1898-1922</i>
L2	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 2: 1923-1925</i>
L3	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 3: 1926-1927</i>
L4	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 4: 1928-1929</i>
L5	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 5: 1930-1931</i>
L6	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 6: 1932-1933</i>
L7	<i>The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 7: 1934-1935</i>
OPP	<i>On Poetry and Poets</i>
PTSE1	<i>The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems</i>
PTSE2	<i>The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 2: Practical Cats and Further Verses</i>
UPUC	<i>The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism</i>
WLF	<i>The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound.</i>

## Samuel Beckett

<i>BDL</i>	<i>The Beckett Digital Library</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Comment c'est, How It Is and / et L'Image: A Critical-Genetic Edition / Une édition critic-génétique.</i>
<i>CDW</i>	<i>The Complete Dramatic Works</i>
<i>Com etc.</i>	<i>Company; Ill Seen Ill Said; Worstward Ho; Stirrings Still</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i>
<i>CSP</i>	<i>The Complete Short Prose: 1929-1989</i>
<i>Dis</i>	<i>Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Beckett's Dream notebook</i>
<i>Dream</i>	<i>Dream of Fair to Middling Women</i>
<i>EB</i>	<i>Echo's Bones</i>
<i>L1</i>	<i>The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929-1940</i>
<i>L2</i>	<i>The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 2: 1941-1956</i>
<i>L3</i>	<i>The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 3: 1957-1965</i>
<i>L4</i>	<i>The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 4: 1966-1989</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Mercier and Camier</i>
<i>Mur</i>	<i>Murphy</i>
<i>PTD</i>	<i>Proust and 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit'</i>
<i>TN</i>	<i>Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable</i>
<i>TNSB1</i>	<i>The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: Waiting for Godot</i>
<i>W</i>	<i>Watt</i>

## Reference

<i>OED</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> (online edition)
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## General

Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are to the King James Version.

Though no distinction is made between abbreviations referring to Eliot's and Beckett's respective volumes of letters, this should be clear from the context.

## Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.



## Acknowledgements

The process of writing a doctoral thesis is at times humiliating, but mostly it is humbling: this project would not exist without the generous assistance and support of many people and institutions.

My heartfelt and enduring gratitude goes to my supervisors, Pat Waugh and Jason Harding, for their warmth, expertise, and patient guidance over the past four years and also prior to my arrival in Durham. It is thanks to their endeavour and the generosity of Durham University that I received the Durham Doctoral Scholarship.

This project owes a great deal to two friends. My sincerest thanks to Marc Botha, who not only helped us make the Pretoria-Durham transition, but whose thought and humanity were a constant spur to better writing and better thinking. And to Arthur Rose, for his patience, pragmatism, and intellectual generosity.

A host of friends and comrades offered advice and assistance. Special thanks goes to Matthew Feldman, Andries Wessels and my other University of Pretoria colleagues, Marco Bernini, the librarians both at Durham and UP; thanks also to the numerous interlocutors from conferences and reading groups. To my Durham friends: Francesca Bratton, Sownak Bose, Jon Wilson, Zhang Zhuoli, Fraser Riddle, Tom Smith, Ellinor Mattson, Steffi John. Mika Vale gets a line to himself.

My parents, Gus and Hettie, whom I cannot thank sufficiently for their love and unceasing encouragement. Ek het nie die woorde om te sê hoeveel ek julle waardeer nie – veral nie in Engels nie.

Lastly, my wife, Michelle, without whose sacrifice and love none of this would have been possible. I dedicate this thesis to her.

## Introduction

### Of the same species: Eliot, Beckett, humility, humiliation

Humility and humiliation have an awkward, often unacknowledged intimacy. The former may be a queenly, cardinal, or monkish virtue; it may attest to a diffident spirit or a slavish disposition. It has been cast as a component of magnanimity, an enabling awareness of human limitation, and a religious ideal. Much less equivocally, humiliation conjures negative associations. It implies violence against autonomy and points to an affective state at the extreme end of shame. Yet between humility and humiliation there is common ground. A shared etymology links them to lowliness (*humilis*) and, further down, to the earth (*humus*). And in ascetic traditions painfully aware of humanity's quintessence – 'dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (Gen 3:19) – humiliation cultivates humility.

Like the terms in question, T. S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett share an imperfect likeness. In Eliot's work the divine maintains an awful proximity, while in Beckett's work it keeps a terrible distance. This difference is perhaps analogous to Watt's fathoming of Mr Knott: 'to many on the ground floor the nearness of Mr Knott must long be a horror, and long a horror to others on the first his farness' (*W*, 113). What appears to divide the two writers is also what draws them into closer kinship. Between them is a common though differently handled interest in the suffering of body and soul. A deep and abiding fascination with Dante inflects their unique expressions of modern purgatory. And, as I will argue, their work recuperates something of the affinity between humility and humiliation.

Humility is a word that pervades Eliot's writing, most notably after 1927. It features in essays on religion, politics, and literature, and it emerges among private letters and biographical accounts as a foundational aspect of his faith. 'The Catholic', he claimed in a public address (*CP4*, 815-816, Eliot's emphasis), 'is alone in affirming humility as the

greatest and first of the Christian virtues', adding dogmatically that 'apart from Christianity, humility is not a virtue.' In Eliot's poetry, humility is declared to be the most profound form of knowledge: 'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire / Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless' (*PTSEI*, 188). Though more mutedly, the pre-conversion years also bear witness to the virtue's importance. From the medieval cast of his mother's religious poetry to a deeply instilled diffidence towards his forebears, humility marks Eliot's New England upbringing. In early adulthood it colours his trenchant scepticism about knowledge, experience, and the ultimate validity of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> It modulates between the modesties and self-ironies of the early poems. And it is discernible as an aspect of the famous claims about impersonality, self-sacrifice, and one's relation to the dead. Indeed, the pervasiveness of humility in Eliot's work tempts a reader into an impish reversal of his claim about Byron (*CP5*, 432): it is difficult to say whether Eliot was a humble man, or a man who liked to pose as a humble man.

While Eliot had much less to say about humiliation in his critical prose, he nevertheless regarded it as 'one of the most important elements in human life' (*CPI*, 747). Biographically, humiliation shadows his unhappy marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood. Creatively, it manifests in the sharp embarrassments of the early poetry and in the later work's rehearsal of shame. Humiliation is a word that resonates with Eliot's desire for 'ascetic' and 'violent' spiritual discipline (*L4*, 129), with his longing for the rigours of monastic life. Understood as a willed act of self-abasement, submission, or contrition, it also informs his belief in self-sacrifice and his gravitation towards exemplars (in art and life) of noble suffering: Aeneas, Thomas à Becket, Pascal, Charles de Foucauld, and the heroes of Greek, Racinian, and Shakespearean tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> See Donald Childs, *From Philosophy to Poetry: T. S. Eliot's Study of Knowledge and Experience* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), 85.

In Beckett's thinking about humility and humiliation no two figures loom larger than Thomas à Kempis and Arnold Geulincx. In *The Imitation of Christ*, Beckett encountered many passages that spurred him to a deep, even unhealthy, introspection. He was so taken with Thomas's project of self-abasement that some of his letters were signed with the motto 'Humiliter, Simpliciter, Fideliter' ('meekly, simply, truly'), which also made its way into his early fiction.<sup>1</sup> But unable to pursue the transcendentalism of the *Imitation*, Beckett found greater solace and direction in the *Ethics* of the Flemish Cartesian philosopher, Geulincx. Beckett 'most heartily' recommended the work to others, 'above all the second section of the second chapter of the first tractate, where [Geulincx] disquires on his fourth cardinal virtue, Humility, contemptus negativus sui ipsius [self-denial]' (*LI*, 329). Stripped of its teleological designs, such negative self-regard would become the driving force behind an art always intent on lessening itself.

Mindful that the 'danger is in the neatness of identification' (*Dis*, 19), this thesis does not pursue a consistent comparison between the two authors, nor does it catalogue all references to humility in their writing. Rather, it aims to develop a framework within which the works of Eliot and Beckett are seen as complementary – though not necessarily compatible – performances of humility. This framework is literary-critical, and it emphasises the singularity of the work of art in nuancing the relation between humility and humiliation. Aware that the 'powers and purposes of language are framed by theological premises', to use Shira Wolosky's formulation, I see the authors' respective oeuvres as indebted to a theological tradition within which humility and humiliation are interdependent aspects of the individual subject's awareness of his/her fallibility.<sup>2</sup> This view, delineated below, pits Eliot and Beckett against interpretations of humility that prize it as a social virtue, whether in the guise of modest behaviour or as a mode that drives communal endeavour. In drawing out

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<sup>1</sup> See *Dream*, 209; and *MPTK*, 50.

<sup>2</sup> Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett and Celan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 2.

these parallels and oppositions, the thesis asserts an understanding of humiliation as a self-reflexive and potentially positive ethical manoeuvre in bringing about humility. This study thus contributes a literary perspective to a small body of works which, in recent years, have proffered comparable conceptions of humiliation.<sup>1</sup>

I favour the phrase ‘performance of humility’ because it keeps alive an indeterminacy that resists the temptation of critical hagiography or conformity. Such scepticism is necessary in dealing with humility in general. It is crucial when approaching writers whose preoccupation with humility is firmly established both in their own work and in scholarly discourse. Thinking of performances of humility encourages discernment between sanctimony and sincerity, between what David E. Cooper calls the ‘hubris (humility) of belief’ and the ‘hubris (humility) of posture’.<sup>2</sup> In short, it urges an alertness to both the ‘pharisee’s tarantara’ and the ‘publican’s whinge’ (*Dis*, 68). Not in the spirit of Pyrrhonism but rather with a suspension of belief, this thesis heeds La Rochefoucauld’s warning that humility may at times be ‘an artifice by which pride debases itself in order to exalt itself’.<sup>3</sup>

A second reason for thinking about performances of humility is that it foregrounds its pragmatic, concrete manifestation – in a word, humiliation. Understood as an effort of self-lowering, humiliation is humility incarnate. Taking Christ’s kenosis as the supreme example of humility, Simone Weil asserts that ‘humiliation is the image of humility’.<sup>4</sup> In such a view humility is prior to humiliation and constitutes the reason for accepting and submitting to

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<sup>1</sup> These include: Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave, and other essays* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Jane Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015); Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011); William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Paul Saurette, *The Kantian Imperative: Humiliation, Common Sense, Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> David E. Cooper, *The Measure of Things: humanism, humility, and mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 162.

<sup>3</sup> Francois de La Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, trans., annotated, and intro. E. H. Blackmore, A. M. Blackmore, and Francine Giguère (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 254.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 34.

affliction. Where humiliation is an *a priori* or given condition – as it so often is in Eliot’s and Beckett’s apparently postlapsarian worlds – it elicits humility (or pride) as response. In Christopher Ricks’s eloquent formulation: ‘[h]umiliation may foster humility or may nurse a hurt pride.’<sup>1</sup> With this ambivalence in mind – that humility impels humiliation or, conversely, that states of humiliation invite humility – this thesis traces the relation between the terms within three categories: the affective, the ethical, and the aesthetic.

These are the explicit preoccupations of the thesis. More broadly, it situates itself in relation to theories and interpretations of humility that provide contrast or correspondence with the position and performance of humility in the works of Eliot and Beckett. The first of these theories is the Aristotelian or ‘realistic assessment’ account; the second is democratic humility; and the third is religious humility. While these frameworks offer distinct positions on humility, the borders between them are often fluid. It should be noted that the designations are not necessarily representative of the way in which authors label their own work but offer us handles by which to grab the bundle.

### **Three theories of humility**

In the ‘realistic assessment’ account, as the term suggests, humility is regarded as a just estimation of self-worth: the humble person neither overvalues her merit nor does she succumb to self-deprecation. The pursuit of this mean – prevalent in virtue ethics over the last three decades – has its basis in Aristotle’s great-souled man (*megalopsychos*). As depicted in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the magnanimous man is a figure who shuns both vanity and expressions of inferiority, expects acknowledgement level with his virtue, and is motivated by honour and not by altruism.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, his accurate self-assessment is anchored in

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 241.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 32, 68.

respect for truth and he thus takes fair measure of his worth and accomplishments.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, both the boaster and self-deprecator fall foul of the mean at opposite ends: the boaster exaggerates his worth, while the self-deprecator wilfully underrates his worth. Self-deprecation, however, is adjudged the more grievous affront to magnanimity since it is a more vulgar attribute: ‘Smallness of soul is more opposed than vanity to greatness of soul, because it is more common, as well as worse.’<sup>2</sup>

From this brief account it should already be clear that Aristotelian *megalopsychia* ill fits Christian-inflected understandings of humility. A crucial reason for this is the incompatibility between Greek and Christian thinking on the subject. Despite Thomas Aquinas’s attempt to consolidate humility and magnanimity as complementary aspects of ‘right reason’ and thus establish humility as a subset of temperance, scholars maintain that the two qualities remain incongruent.<sup>3</sup> Howard J. Curzer explains that ‘*megalopsychia*’ and ‘*mikropsychia*’ lose much of their meaning in being translated as ‘pride’ and ‘humility’, while Alasdair MacIntyre emphatically asserts that ‘humility...could appear in *no* Greek list of the virtues’.<sup>4</sup> Beckett’s own English translation from Geulincx’s *Ethics* seconds this: ‘*Humility foreign to the ancients*’.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that contemporary virtue ethics has generally favoured the term ‘modesty’ in its retrieval of Aristotle’s truthful self-assessment; ‘modesty’ more readily speaks to publicly-coded conduct and less obviously

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas quoted in Howard J. Curzer, ‘Aristotle’s much maligned megalopsychos’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 2 (1991): 148: ‘Humility restrains the appetite from aiming at great things against right reason while magnanimity urges the mind to great things in accord with right reason. Hence it is clear that magnanimity is not opposed to humility: indeed they concur in this, that each is according to Right reason.’

<sup>4</sup> Curzer, ‘Aristotle’s much maligned megalopsychos’, 136; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Geulincx, *Ethics: With Samuel Beckett’s Notes*, trans. Martin Wilson; ed. Han van Ruler, Anthony Uhlmann and Martin Wilson (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2006), 311. As discussed in Chapter 4, Beckett offers a caricature of the haughty benevolence of the great-souled man in *Molloy*. See Ch 4, 165.

leans on a lowly regard of the self. Even when ‘humility’ is used, it is done with a deliberate indifference to theological overtones in order to wrest it back as a secular virtue.<sup>1</sup>

In those accounts most faithfully informed by the *Nicomachean Ethics*, modesty is a civilized trait of the highly-gifted individual who resists exaggerating her merit. But an objection that arises from such an understanding is whether self-worth can ever be quantifiable. Without getting entangled in the niceties of epistemology, it is worth noting that for certain Christian writers, realism implies recognizing an utter lack. Thus Iris Murdoch remarks (in language that subtly shades Eliot’s thoughts about Baudelaire’s humility [CP3, 248]): ‘Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues.’<sup>2</sup> She continues by saying that ‘the humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are’.<sup>3</sup> This, however, is not the view of virtue ethicists whose theories are informed by Aristotle. It is telling that several authors ask us to picture someone who is objectively accomplished though handles his/her accomplishment with modesty. Alex Sinha, for instance, offers the case of Roger Federer:

Only sheer stupidity could prevent him from recognizing that he was peerless during his five-year run at the top. Does it simply follow that from the public nature of his career, or his exceptional talent, that he cannot be humble? It would be fairer, and more plausible, if humility lay within his grasp, so long as he handled the knowledge of his abilities properly.<sup>4</sup>

Given this emphasis on objective rankings or accolades, realistic assessment accounts are preoccupied with what Nancy E. Snow calls ‘narrow humility’.<sup>5</sup> She defines it as ‘humility

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Alex Sinha, ‘Modernising the virtue of humility’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90, no. 2 (2012): 265; Daniel Statman, ‘Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 169 (1992): 429.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2014), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Sinha, ‘Modernizing the virtue of humility’, 269.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Snow, ‘Humility’, *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 29 (1995): 207.



about *specific* personal traits’, and opposes it to ‘existential humility’, which emphasises ‘human finitude’ and more accurately defines democratic humility.

The value of narrow humility or realistic assessment, it is argued, lies in avoiding shows of false modesty. More importantly, it enables us to navigate between what Tony Milligan calls the ‘moral-cognitive failure[s]’ implicit in both over- and underestimation.<sup>1</sup> The primary criterion for proponents of this mean, then, is that self-knowledge is a good in itself (though the absence of any mention of Socratic wisdom is a telling lacuna). Rejecting the negative self-valuations of Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther, Norvin Richards suggests that it would be specious for the ‘rather splendid among us’ to subject ourselves to unwarranted abasement.<sup>2</sup> In his turn, Aaron Ben-Ze’ew proposes a realistic, evaluative conception of self, which allows us to appreciate our accomplishments in a comparative framework; the same framework should also allow us to regard our worth as *similar* to – though not the *same* as – that of others.<sup>3</sup>

An outlier among theories of modesty is Julia Driver’s ‘ignorance’ account, which argues that modesty constitutes an involuntary underestimation of one’s worth: ‘Modesty is dependent upon the epistemic defect of not knowing one’s own worth.’<sup>4</sup> Driver rejects both behavioural accounts of modesty that predicate on social inhibition and also the ‘mere’ understatement of self-worth, since this is tantamount to false modesty. Theorists in the mainstream of realistic assessment (Ben-Ze’ew, Milligan, Schueler, Statman) have rebutted this position on various fronts: virtues are characterized by voluntary choice; ignorance is therefore not a virtue (*virtu* – strength); ignorance disallows the possibility of identifying one’s talents and realising one’s civic duty.<sup>5</sup> The latter objection corresponds with David

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Milligan, ‘Murdochian Humility’, *Religious Studies* 43, no. 2 (2007): 220.

<sup>2</sup> Norvin Richards, *Humility* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Ben-Ze’ew, ‘The Virtue of Modesty’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1993): 235.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Driver, ‘The Virtues of Ignorance’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 86, no. 7 (1989): 374.

<sup>5</sup> See Ben-Ze’ew, ‘The Virtue of Modesty’, 236; Milligan, ‘Murdochian Humility’, 219; Statman, ‘Modesty’, 423-424; G. F. Schueler, ‘Why IS Modesty a Virtue?’, *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 835.

Hume's dismissal of humility as a 'monkish' virtue. Hume catalogues it among the vices on the basis that it 'neither advance[s] a man's fortune in the world, nor render[s] him a more valuable member of society'.<sup>1</sup> While Driver's account is at odds with most others', it still conforms to an Aristotelian model on two counts: it is centrally concerned with the idiosyncratic flaws or merits of the individual, and regards self-deprecation as an undesirable extreme. Perhaps more importantly, it is at odds with an active and intentional stripping away of knowledge and mastery – what Beckett calls 'get[ting] back to ignorance'.<sup>2</sup>

The most practically-minded version of the realistic assessment account is Hastings Rashdall's. Proceeding from the basis that accurate self-knowledge is a good and that underestimation should be avoided, Rashdall argues that humility should transcend its traditionally 'non-utilitarian' and 'non-teleological character'.<sup>3</sup> Rejecting the 'occasional gross aberrations of Christian sentiment', he more vehemently opposes 'Aristotle's revolting picture of the high-souled man' since it leads to complacent self-regard.<sup>4</sup> What offsets this non-utilitarian quality is benevolence: 'The good man cares too much for others to derive pleasure from the thought that they are worse than himself.'<sup>5</sup> Despite recoiling at the pride of the magnanimous man, Rashdall's theory operates on the same baseline assumption of giftedness. The difference is that while Aristotle attributes this to an inborn aristocratic superiority, Rashdall suggests that it might be down to luck, grace, or a good upbringing. And although the public duty of his humble individual is not dispassionate like the great-souled man's, it is still activated by an awareness of his/her elevated status and self-sufficiency. Such a view explains, in part, why Eliot saw parallels between Rashdall's thought and

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1912), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett quoted in Anne Atik, *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 121.

<sup>3</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy*, Volume 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 204-207.

<sup>4</sup> Rashdall would later oppose Christian humility with more force: 'There is something singularly grotesque in the notion of a man being humble because, though he could not see any essential beauty or excellence in it, he had received a supernatural communication of the fact that he ought to be humble.' Hastings Rashdall, *Conscience and Christ: Six Lectures on Christian Ethics* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 249.

<sup>5</sup> Rashdall, *Theory of Good*, 206.

Unitarianism.<sup>1</sup> While Rashdall's account comes close to falling under the next theory I discuss, his pragmatism is still underpinned by a self-evaluation that positively expresses itself in terms of individual capacity.

The second prominent theory of humility is 'democratic humility'. I adopt this term from an essay by Mark Button in which he gives the following definition: 'democratic humility [is] a cultivated sensitivity toward the *incompleteness* and contingency both of one's personal moral powers and commitments, and of the particular forms, laws, and institutions that structure one's political and social life with others.'<sup>2</sup> The word that differentiates this theory from the realistic assessment account is 'incompleteness': what sets Button's theory and others like it against those outlined above is a fundamental belief in human finitude. Epistemically such a view approaches religious humility in its negative valuation of self-worth, though it does not require belief in transcendental dependence. Practically it deflates notions of individual self-sufficiency in order to facilitate communal endeavour and social change.

Democratic humility is thus marked by an aspirational quality: the admission of universal limitation should not result in apathy but rather serve as a spur to better the *status quo*. Jeanine Grenberg argues that '[a]ny humility based on flaws would, first of all, be one that might eventually be removed or remedied'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Julie E. Cooper asserts that a humble 'acknowledgment of human finitude [is] a source for collective human power'.<sup>4</sup> Martha Nussbaum, though applying a different lexicon, offers an analogous argument. The ontological realisation that these other theorists call 'finitude' Nussbaum calls 'primitive

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch 1, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Button, "'A Monkish Kind of Virtue'? For and Against Humility', *Political Theory* 22 (2005): 841, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanine Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Julie E. Cooper, *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 4.

shame’ – our awareness of lack, fragmentation, and incompleteness.<sup>1</sup> In its healthiest manifestation, primitive shame may serve as an encouragement to positive striving: ‘shame of the primitive kind is closely linked, at least, to more productive and potentially creative types of shame that spur people on to high achievements.’<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum argues that this longing may be turned into a positive, practical value which anchors our march onwards and upwards in the belief that the type of completeness or perfection one craves ‘is a type of completeness or perfection that one rightly ought to have’.<sup>3</sup> Such belief should not encourage a spirit of entitlement or an attitude of complacency (*contra* the great-souled man). Instead it should foster a kind of hopeful hardiness in spite of failures and disappointments – failures and disappointments which, in fact, pave the way for progress. Ideally transmuted, a realisation of finitude should enable rather than stultify.

Democratic humility is clearly a product of post-Enlightenment subjectivity: while it emphasises universal finitude, it asserts with equal force the inherent dignity of each individual. In short, its impulse is affirmative and its project ameliorating. Given that its theorists are chiefly concerned with promoting egalitarian forms of government and compassionate law-making, it is unsurprising that humiliation is not a complementary aspect of democratic humility. Grenberg rejects the reduction of humility ‘to a medieval state of self-mortification’, and Nussbaum sees humiliation as the intentional stripping away of human dignity.<sup>4</sup> So although sacrifice is an integral concept to democratic humility, it is always underpinned by the ideals of human flourishing, self-realisation, and sometimes even perfectibility. The last word brings to mind both the humanism of the 1920s and 1930s and the Unitarian faith of his family that Eliot vehemently opposed. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, even prior to his conversion Eliot believed that ‘it is not only inexact but dangerous...to

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 336.

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 336.

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 184.

<sup>4</sup> Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics*, 190; Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 204.

regard humanity...as more than a provisionally postulated end' (*CP1*, 54-55).<sup>1</sup> A diametrically opposed alternative is the 'religious view': a fundamental belief in the 'radical imperfection of either Man or Nature' (*CP3*, 620).<sup>2</sup>

It is only within the third framework – religious humility, and specifically Christian humility – that such radical imperfection is admitted. As a totality, Christian humility is marked by the inversion of a worldly calculus: 'And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted' (Matt 23:12). The Gospel verse not only promotes a countercultural attitude but also a countercultural imperative. To modern readers, the King James's use of the verb 'humble' here obscures its synonymy with 'humiliate' – a dissociation that sets in after the Enlightenment, as reflected in the *OED*. However, an example of usage from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) (copiously copied from in Beckett's *Dream* notebook) implies the *reflexive* meaning of the verb 'humiliate' ('to humble or abase oneself'): 'How much we ought to...examine & humiliate our selves, & seek to God, & call to him for mercy.'<sup>3</sup> The example neatly captures three aspects of Christian humility: dependency on God, inspection of oneself, and the active humiliation or lowering of oneself. It is during the eighteenth century, however, that 'humiliation' begins to signal an *interpersonal* rather than *intrapersonal* act: humiliation is degradation visited by one person on another. By the nineteenth century, a clear definitional gulf had arisen between 'humility' and 'humiliation', with the *OED* supplying the following: 'I think "humiliation" is a very different condition of mind from humility. "Humiliation" no man can desire; it is shame and torture.'

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch 3, 124-126.

<sup>2</sup> The last words are T. E. Hulme's, which Eliot approvingly quotes in rejecting humanism. Eliot's belief in original sin is discussed in Chapter 1; his opposition to humanism is addressed more fully in Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> Though the final listing under this primary sense occurs in 1776, the word had already undergone a change that signals passive and enforced rather than active and self-inflicted suffering. In these examples after 1621, 'humiliate' is no longer unequivocally used as a reflexive verb. For a fuller discussion of usage, see Miller, *Humiliation*, 175-176.

The undesirability of humiliation is at the core of Christian humility: not doing as one likes but as commanded. It is for this reason that Christian conceptions of humility centre on the notion of kenosis: Christ's humble submission to his incarnation. The scriptural basis for kenosis is Philippians 2:5-7: 'Christ Jesus...Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.' In addition to supplying the inimitable example of humility, Christ's kenosis endows the concept of humiliation with twofold significance: firstly, kenosis implies a humiliation of being (the Logos become incarnate); secondly, it implies material humiliation (low birth, poverty, death on a cross).

Expanding on the first point, it is important to recognise that kenosis constitutes a radical ontological displacement. For Kierkegaard, the recognition of this fact dwarfs any consideration for the incidental and material humiliations Christ would suffer in life. Kierkegaard thus claims that it is 'infantile' to regard Christ's poverty and low social status as the primary index of his humility. Of paramount importance is the Son's willingness to divest his divinity and become human:

The paradox is primarily that God, the eternal, has entered time as a particular human being. Whether this particular human is a servant or an emperor is neither here nor there. It is no more adequate for God to be a king than to be a beggar; it is no greater degradation for God to be a beggar than to be an emperor.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, theologians who regard the kenotic mode to be determined by Christ's bodily and material humiliations. In this view, as David R. Law explains, '[k]enosis...denotes the human experiences of suffering, and death undergone by the historical Christ in his earthly existence. Here "kenosis" becomes a metaphor for Christ's humiliation'.<sup>2</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 502.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Law, *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 60.

Christ's incarnation is a unique event (what Eliot calls 'supermiraculous' [CP4, 351, n.24] and thus unrepeatable), his sufferings as a human being supply the template for holy living and holy dying. It is in suffering – not triumph – that Estragon identifies with Christ ('All my life I've compared myself to him' [CDW, 51]); it is in humiliation and bodily affliction that the narrator of *Watt* sees a likeness between the title character and Bosch's depiction of 'Christ Mocked' (W, 139).<sup>1</sup>

Understood in the terminology of our previous theories, religious humility firstly implies self-knowledge (its second predicate, discussed below, is self-lowering). However, in religious humility, self-knowledge is distinguished by intense scrutiny both of one's individual weakness and also of the deficiencies inherent to all humanity. As such, it stands as a qualification of the Delphic imperative to 'know thyself' – both as a unique soul and as a member of the species. Taken together, these two aspects of self-knowledge form part of what is variously called cognitive, imperfect, or rational humility.<sup>2</sup> Superficially, imperfect humility appears to amount to a combination of the realistic and democratic accounts of introspection. Inspection of oneself shares with Aristotelian theories an evaluative perspective, though here comparisons and superlatives are exclusively negative. As Button remarks, 'the humble do not simply acknowledge their limitations or resist overestimating their moral qualities but hold a positively negative view of the self and of the self's moral powers without God'.<sup>3</sup> Hence the seventh step of St Benedict's ladder of humility urges the sinner to not only 'denounce himself as *inferior to all* and more worthless, but also believe it in his inner consciousness, humbling himself and saying with the prophet: "But I am a worm

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Bryden astutely remarks that it is 'in a context of pain, violence, and victimisation that a distinction emerges in Beckett's work between the figure of God, and that of Christ. Rather than being blurred with the Father, in a triumphalist Godhead, Christ is overwhelmingly discerned in kenotic mode: emptied, made destitute, and available for suffering of the worst kind'. Mary Bryden, *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 140.

<sup>2</sup> See Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 150-151.

<sup>3</sup> Button, "'A Monkish Kind of Virtue'?", 844.

and not a man, a shame of men and an outcast of the people”’.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, while admitting that ‘[a]ll of us are weak and frail’, Thomas à Kempis urges his reader to ‘hold...no man more frail than thyself.’<sup>2</sup> And the anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* writes that Mary of Bethany (the text’s humble penitent *par excellence*) ‘knew well, by her own experience in sober truth, that she was a viler wretch than anyone else’.<sup>3</sup>

The second part of self-knowledge is a general awareness of human fallibility. In this regard it appears to correspond with democratic humility. But where the latter instrumentalises human weakness by turning it into a means for upward mobility, religious humility treats it as the grounds for further abasement. Jeremy Taylor, whose *Holy Living and Dying* both Eliot and Beckett read closely, claims that humanity’s manifold feebleness should inspire a negative self-regard:

1. The spirit of a man is light and troublesome. 2. His body is brutish and sickly. 3. He is constant in his folly and error, and inconstant in his manners and good purposes. 4. His labours are vain, intricate, and endless. 5. His fortune is changeable, but seldom pleasing, never perfect. 6. His wisdom comes not till he be ready to die, that is, till he is past using it. 7. His death is certain, always ready at the door, but never far off.<sup>4</sup>

Imperfect humility has a ‘perfect’ or ‘affective’ counterpart, which emphasises the affirmative reinforcement of divine love. As Jane Foulcher explains, ‘[i]t is in the “inpouring of love” that allows the movement from a cold, rational understanding of the humiliating truth about oneself to a warm, affective, and ultimately liberating reality where one is no longer afraid to be known’.<sup>5</sup> The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* typifies perfect humility as permanent since its source is everlasting. It also induces a self-forgetfulness that is

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St Benedict* (London: S. P. C. K, 1931), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, in *The Harvard Classics: The Confessions of St Augustine and The Imitation of Christ by Thomas A Kempis*, trans. William Benham (New York, NY: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909), 207.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1981), 154-155.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying: With Prayers Containing the Whole Duty of a Christian, and the Parts of Devotion Fitted to All Occasions, and Furnished for All Necessities* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1913), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility*, 197.



attendant on humility (again, Mary of Bethany is exemplary because her imperfect humility is supplemented and even overwhelmed by perfect humility). In getting to grips with her own inferiority the sinner humbles herself; by contemplating the greatness of God, the believer forgets herself. Humility then transforms from thinking less *of* oneself to thinking less *about* oneself.<sup>1</sup>

From self-knowledge there is a clear trajectory to self-lowering. Prefiguring the ‘realism’ of Iris Murdoch cited above, Simone Weil writes that, ‘[o]nce we have understood that we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing’.<sup>2</sup> In this shift from the epistemic to the ethical – from knowledge to sacrifice – humiliation shifts from being a baseline condition (truth) to a measure (sacrifice) by which that baseline condition is rendered still more visible. In extreme cases this means self-mortification: hair-shirts, self-flagellation, fasting, prostration, and so on. (It is worth recalling Eliot’s and Beckett’s mutual fascination with self-harm.) But most writings on humility urge detachment. Geulincx, for instance, advocates ‘disregard for the self’, which requires the acceptance of affliction rather than the active pursuit of self-harm.<sup>3</sup> Again, Christ’s life stands as paragon: turning the other cheek, living in poverty, enduring extremes of physical and mental affliction – all are instances of humbly accepting humiliation. Of course, in appreciating the revelation and realisation of humility that comes with such afflictions, humiliation is endowed with positive potential.<sup>4</sup> As Simone Weil asserts: ‘[i]t is impossible to forgive whoever has done us harm if that harm has lowered us. We have to think that it has not lowered us, but has revealed our true level.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is in this regard that Max Scheler distinguishes between the other-regarding awe of humility and the inward-facing self-concern of shame. See Scheler, *Person and Self-Value: Three Essays* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Geulincx, *Ethics*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Margalit, *The Decent Society*, 12: ‘The lesson Christians are supposed to learn from Jesus’ humiliating journey is to consider humiliating behavior as a trial rather than a sound reason for feeling humiliated.’

<sup>5</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 6.

## Thesis outline

It is against the background of these philosophical and theological frameworks that I offer readings of humility and humiliation in Beckett and Eliot. The chapters generally develop chronologically and, as indicated above, are loosely paired according to three categories: the affective, the ethical, and the aesthetic.

Chapter 1 posits 1917 as a watershed year in Eliot's writing. I argue that the short story, 'Eeldrop and Appleplex', indexes Eliot's move away from social embarrassment towards theological shame – that is, a sense of sin. The short story demonstrates this shift in opposing temporal codes against an absolute moral code. With reference to the story and some of Eliot's early poetry, I first consider moments of embarrassment and disgust, and how these affective experiences impede an appreciation of a given situation's moral reality. Following this, I pay particular attention to Eliot's valuation of private truth and fixed moral standards, both in 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' and in Eliot's criticism. The final section juxtaposes Eeldrop's remarks about tragedy alongside the essays 'Thomas Middleton' and 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', as well as the experimental verse drama, *Sweeney Agonistes*. In doing so, I take account of Eliot's remarks about the relationship between tragedy and morality. What emerges in this chapter is an understanding of humility as structural; that is, the individual soul's acknowledgment of an absolute law.

Chapter 2 considers the relation between embarrassment and pride in Beckett's early writing. Juxtaposing personal letters and certain stories from the 1934 collection, *More Pricks than Kicks*, I propose that embarrassment emerges as a marker of the superiority and 'isolationism' (LI, 257) Beckett regarded as symptoms of his anxiety neurosis. After discussing certain pre-emptive strategies against embarrassment, I proceed to close readings of 'Dante and the Lobster' and 'Love and Lethe'. In these stories, embarrassment is counteracted through Belacqua's identification with Christ – a manoeuvre that does not

confer humility but rather reinforces the character's sense of proud otherness. At the end of the chapter, Beckett's early and incidental embarrassment is briefly contrasted with the later work's representation of an existential embarrassment. The latter is conceived as an aspect of humility in which the embarrassed human condition is accepted without an irritable reaching after self-protective strategies.

Chapter 3 focuses on certain insistent reiterations of theological positions that collectively define Eliot's understanding of Christian humility between 1927 and 1935. It grapples with humility as a component of ethical living and reflects on the relation between belief and action. The sermon of *Murder in the Cathedral* serves as a structuring device to discuss these statements, both because so many of these theological statements are vicariously rehearsed in Thomas Becket's Christmas sermon and also because the play allows for a consideration of the fine line between humility and spiritual pride. The chapter closely discusses the influence of the seventeenth-century divine, Lancelot Andrewes, and the nineteenth-century philosopher, F. H. Bradley – two authors who played a determining role in Eliot's conception of humility and his scepticism about human goodwill. It also expounds the significance of a hitherto unexamined biblical source for the verses of scripture in the sermon that further threads the continuity between grace, humility, and goodwill. Particular attention is given to Eliot's gravitation to certain parts of scripture that inform his rejection of humanitarianism and his espousal of saintly sacrifice.

Chapter 4 considers the ethics of dealing with the humiliation of others. Specifically, it argues that humiliation is an individuating property in Beckett's writing. In the first instance, this is framed as a meta-critical argument that considers the dangers of overly familiar narratives and concepts in Beckett studies. With close reference to *Molloy*, humiliation is then framed as an ontologically determining phenomenon that should disallow the conflation and consolidation of private suffering. A final section draws more broadly on

Beckett's mistrust of charity and posits humility as an important ethical criterion when approaching the suffering of others.

The final two chapters are concerned with aesthetic humility: how a text may humble itself. Chapter 5 centres on Eliot's claim that 'humility is endless' and tests it against the parodic and ironic procedures of *East Coker*. It explores the ways in which the poetry can be said to question its own assumptions and undermine its own importance. I argue that humility is closely allied with the irony that the poet turns upon himself and his own work. Within this larger scheme I demonstrate how Eliot's allusive relationship with Yeats in *East Coker II* is configured within a tension that at once critiques Eliot's own early works but at the same time unsettles the late work as a basis for such critique.

Chapter 6 proceeds along similar lines, asking how a 'syntax of penury' is operational in *How It Is*. To twist Beckett's terms (*Dis*, 27): when the sense is penury, are the words impoverished? Broadly, this question pertains to Beckett's engagement with his own writing and delineates a scepticism in *How It Is* about old foundations and new turnings. The chapter considers three aspects of the novel: its impoverished style, its ironic appropriation of earlier works, and its self-lacerating use of allusion. I argue that the novel's textual penury facilitates humility in its resistance to a writing that has the potential to become what it opposes: a totalizing poetics.

Lest this overview and its categorical correspondences suggest more than a glancing association between the authors, I offer a final caveat about the separation between Eliot and Beckett in this study. In his biography of Beckett, Anthony Cronin provides a suggestive if erroneous point of contact between the two authors: that the allusion to Julian of Norwich in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* arrived via *Four Quartets*.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that Beckett's novel was written in 1931, this alternative textual archaeology telescopes

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 112.

something of the differences and affinities between the two authors. In *Little Gidding*, Eliot weaves the English mystic's 'Sin is Behovely' into the purgatorial yet affirmative vision of his poem (*PTSE1*, 206). Much less reverentially, Beckett transplants the phrase into a profane context of sexual desire (*Dream*, 9). In his *Dream* notebook he went a step further, editorialising Julian's stigmatic experience as 'Eschatological catamenia' (menstrual flow) (*DN*, 59). What brings Eliot and Beckett together through this allusion is a fundamental belief in fallenness: sin is behovely – that is, inescapable. What divides them is the way in which they assert their view of humanity's lowly position: for Eliot, it is a question of one's relation to God; for Beckett, it is a question of self-emptying. The way up and the way down are not exactly the same.

## Chapter 1

### From manners to morals: shame and sin in ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’

During a brief summer stay in Marburg in 1914, Eliot wrote to Conrad Aiken with a typical blend of bawdy and self-consciousness (*LI*, 44-47). He asks for a blue suit to be sent on from London so that he may appear suitably ‘*herrlich*’ when lunching with his Lutheran hosts on Sundays, records stuttering and sweating through conversations in German, and produces two cartoon sketches – one of a ‘Herr Professor’ (in whose presence the sweats and stutters occur) and one of a bow-tied, cigar-smoking Bolo. The latter supplements eight lines of ribald verse and pseudo-scholarly naivety about a supposed *double entendre* in the lines ‘Will you take [hyena] tail / Or just a bit of p(enis)?’ Such playful indecency then leads him to a bashful thought: ‘By the way, I find that I have only one (torn) pair of pajamas, and my dictionary does not give the word for them. *Que faire?* The dictionary, however, gives the German equivalent for *gracilent* and *pudibund*. You might do something with that, but I lack the inspiration.’

Perhaps the reason that Eliot felt unable to use the two words – whether in letter or in spirit – is that he had already exploited some of their moods and manifestations. ‘Gracilent’, catching ‘slim’ and also ‘graceful’ in its meaning, is caught up in several descriptive phrases of the early poetry. ‘On a Portrait’ depicts its subject’s ‘slender hands’; ‘Mandarins’ juxtaposes ‘thin translucent porcelain’ and ultra-refined conversation; ‘Portrait of a Lady’ homes in on twisted ‘lilac stalks’ and the fragility of friendships; and Prufrock is keenly aware of ‘Arms that are braceleted and white and bare’ or ‘wrap about a shawl’ (*PTSEI*, 232, 243, 11, 7). ‘Pudibund’, with its connotations of modesty and even prudishness, has wider if

subtler penetration.<sup>1</sup> A sharpened sense of delicacy touches most of the early poems that centre on interpersonal relations and communication. Pudibund is also a word well-placed within the world of New England propriety and Unitarian principles. It is a word compatible with Eliot's blush at the state of his pyjamas and with his frustrated sexual impulses.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the poems written before 1915 witness a preoccupation with self-possession and control. It is exhibited in the Laforguean imitations where masks, marionettes and pulled strings play a significant role; it is heard in the polite conversations hedged by 'guesses and supposes' ('Convictions', *PTSEI*, 238). Disorder is also kept at arm's length by authorial intervention in atmospheric conditions: one speaker orchestrates an emotional parting between lovers ('La Figlia Che Piange', *PTSEI*, 28), another contrives a fatal attack just as conversation is failing ('Nocturne', *PTSEI*, 234). These are deliberate disguises and measures that attest in their very deliberateness to the threat of exposure. And what might be exposed registers, for the most part, on a spectrum of decorum: at stake in removing the mask is the loss of face. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' perhaps best demonstrates the embarrassability that colours the early poetry. In Prufrock Eliot had created a character wracked by his indecision, obsessiveness, fear of action and, most importantly, the fear of being misunderstood. His *modus operandi* – captured in the synecdoche (a device given to evasiveness) of a sideways-scuttling 'pair of claws' (*PTSEI*, 7) – is typified by what Erving Goffman called the 'avoidance process'.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to *Prufrock and Other Observations*, the poetry written during the latter half of the decade adopts more direct methods. There are no gracious withdrawals in these

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<sup>1</sup> For 'gracilent', the *OED* gives 'slender, thin', while its adjectival form ('gracile') could mean 'gracefully slender'. 'Pudibund' may signal something that 'is the subject or cause of shame' or, less dramatically, 'modest, bashful, prudish'.

<sup>2</sup> 'One walks about the street with one's desires, and one's refinement rises up like a wall whenever opportunity approaches. I should be better off, I sometimes think, if I had disposed of my virginity and shyness several years ago' (*LI*, 82).

<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1967), 15.

poems which Eliot thought might shock his mother (see *LI*, 441), since they unveil a kind of suffering that goes beyond the pains of social awkwardness. Certain unpublished poems from around 1915 already herald a shift from *faux pas* to moral infraction, from the buried life with its private verdicts to an existence judged in absolute terms. ‘The Burnt Dancer’ (*PTSEI*, 262), though situated in ‘a world too strange for pride or shame... / ...too strange for praise or blame / Too strange for good or evil’, nonetheless begins to register these categories; and ‘The Love Song of St. Sebastian’ (265-266) signals a kind of obsessive self-loathing very different from the self-recriminations of embarrassment. Yet these uncollected poems appear to be the outcome of a carefree young man’s abstracted longing for ‘tragic suffering’ that ‘takes you away from yourself’.<sup>1</sup> However, his marriage to Vivien Haigh-Wood on 26 June 1915 precipitated a very concrete kind of agony that was rooted in unrelenting financial worries, continual physical and mental lapses, and – most significantly – betrayal.<sup>2</sup> Out of this painful reality came poetry that was preoccupied with the shame of exposure, infidelity, emasculation and inaction.

The watershed year for Eliot’s transition from a poetry of manners to a poetry of morals appears to be 1917. He makes both polemical and private declarations about the need for poets to shed the attachments of their youth; he decides to abandon lyrical free verse for ‘experiments’ in quatrain form; and he publishes his only short story, ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’, in which the title characters scrutinize ‘evil neighbourhoods of silence’ in order to penetrate ‘the cloud of a respectability’ hanging over them (*CPI*, 525).<sup>3</sup> The public

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot to Conrad Aiken on 30 September 1914 (*LI*, 63): ‘That, in fact, is I think the great use of suffering, if it’s *tragic* suffering – it takes you away from yourself – and petty suffering does exactly the reverse, and kills your inspiration.’ As an indication of Eliot’s relatively care-free existence at this time, he remarks in the same letter that ‘I have been living a pleasant and useless life of late’.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of Vivien’s affair with Bertrand Russell, see Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 91; also Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude, 1872-1921* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1996), 432-450. Eliot’s cryptic remarks about Russell are telling (*L6*, 562-563): ‘He has done Evil, without being big enough or conscious enough to Be evil. I owe him this, that the spectacle of Bertie was one contributing influence to my conversion.’

<sup>3</sup> For Eliot’s remark about the quatrain poems, see Donald Hall’s interview with Eliot for *The Paris Review* 21 (1959): 8-10.



statement occurs in *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry* (1917), where Eliot takes an impassioned stance on the poet's obligation to gain distance from the shaping forces of adolescence: 'Any poet, if he is to survive as a writer beyond his twenty-fifth year, must alter; he must seek new literary influences; *he will have different emotions to express*. This is disconcerting to that public which likes a poet to spin his whole work out of the feelings of his youth' (*CPI*, 639-640, my emphasis). Though ostensibly defending Pound's poetic development between *Personae* (1909) and *Lustra* (1916), Eliot's words nonetheless appear charged with an intuitive awareness about the resistance that his own development would come to face. Privately and with a pinch of retrospective irony, he confides to Robert Nichols – a future reviewer of *Poems* who would lament a vanished poignancy in the new work – his desire for a new mode of expression:<sup>1</sup>

I am not anxious to write more – or rather I feel that the best promise of continuing is for one to be able to forget, in a way, what one has written already; to be able to detach it completely from one's present self and begin quite afresh, with only the technical experience preserved. This struggle to preserve the advantages of practice and at the same time to defecate the emotions one has expressed already is one of the hardest I know. (*LI*, 212)

To readers of Eliot's early collected poetry, the extent of his formal repertoire might not be immediately apparent. With the exception of 'Conversation Galante', all the poems of *Prufrock and Other Observations* are – despite Eliot's misgivings about the term – written in free verse.<sup>2</sup> Yet the *Poems Written in Early Youth* exhibit tremendous formal dexterity and range. There are examples of ottava rima, *carpe diem* lyrics, an Horatian ode, a modified Shakespearean sonnet and, significantly, quatrain stanzas. Eliot's determination, then, to take the formal design of Théophile Gautier's *Émaux et Camées* as model for his own new work

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Nichols, 'An Ironist', in *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 28-30.

<sup>2</sup> For Eliot's rejection of free verse, see 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' (*CPI*, 511-516).

supports the intentions expressed in his letter to Nichols. Adopting a verse form so different from that which had won him a degree of repute (or infamy in some quarters) would have the double advantage of distancing him from his earlier published work and introducing a tone more apposite to the different set of emotions he wished to express: it could provide the ‘structural decoration of a serious idea’ (CP2, 312). The latter phrase occurs in a passage in ‘Andrew Marvell’ (1921) where Eliot forcibly links Marvell, Gautier and others in their comparable use of ‘levity and seriousness’: ‘this alliance of levity and seriousness (*by which seriousness is intensified*) is characteristic of the sort of wit we are trying to identify’ (CP2, 312, my emphasis). At this point Eliot quotes the same lines from *Émaux et Camées* he had praised in an *Athenaeum* review, ‘The Post-Georgians’ (1919), as a ‘triumph of technique’ and simplicity. ‘Great simplicity,’ he writes in the earlier essay, ‘is only won by an intense moment or by years of intelligent effort, or by both. It represents one of the most arduous conquests of the human spirit: the triumph of feeling and thought over the natural sin of language’ (CP2, 17). Similarly, he offered qualified praise of Blake’s unsettling honesty, which was won by ‘some extraordinary labour of simplification’ and technical rigour (CP2, 187).

If Eliot was drawn to a form that facilitated a triumph over the excesses of language, the attraction is inversely proportional to his depiction of the excesses of living. The control and precision in the rhythmic and rhyming arrangement of the quatrain poems are counterbalanced by the scenes of unrestraint which they frame. Curiously, the work which pre-empted the tone of Eliot’s poetry over the next few years is his only published piece of short fiction, ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’. Notwithstanding the surprising choice of creative medium, the story has a marginalised legacy both in Eliot’s own bibliography and critical reception. Solicited by Pound in his capacity as foreign editor of the *Little Review*, its two sections appeared in the May and September issues of the American magazine respectively.

Eliot himself felt ambivalent about the story. Writing to John Quinn in 1918, he expressed the hope to ‘continue my dialogue’ (*LI*, 253). Yet over a year later he was undecided about publishing it in an ultimately unrealised US edition of his poetry and criticism: ‘I should prefer to withdraw Eeldrop and Appleplexes, which seem to me to be crude stuff. But I don’t feel certain about this and should like to leave it to your [Quinn’s] judgement whether it is better, even if the stuff is poor, to have some prose which is not purely critical’ (*LI*, 373). Even as late as 1923 the story held sufficient interest for Eliot to mention it to three different correspondents. He asked Pound whether it was ‘worth continuing...[a]s a kind of deversoir [overflow] for a variety of thoughts and feels: neither Poetry nor Criticism’ (*L2*, 215). A few days later on his thirty-fifth birthday he dismissed the work in a letter to Wyndham Lewis as a ‘fill up or an occasional release of otherwise useless cerebration’ (*L2*, 223). And early in October he writes to Jane Heap that it has been on his mind (*CPI*, 532 n. 3). Much later he refused permission for its publication in *The Little Review Anthology* (1953) though it appeared in the book despite his wishes.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever Eliot’s attitude towards the prose piece, some of its ‘thoughts and feels’ resonate within his life and work. Eeldrop, after all, resembles his maker in several respects. Like Eliot, who chose for his PhD study the ‘destructive’ (*CPI*, 691-692) philosophy of F. H. Bradley and also read with interest the works of Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross and other mystics, Eeldrop is ‘a sceptic, with a taste for mysticism’ (*CPI*, 525-526). He, too, is a bank-clerk, and the suburb which he and Appleplex scrutinize bears resemblance to the Eliots’ surroundings at 18 Crawford Mansions (see *LI*, 501). As for correspondences with other works, the story initiates a tragicomic tone that finds immediate extension in the quatrain poems. The duo’s self-importance undercuts the earnestness of their claims without completely voiding them. On the one hand their quest seems silly, even pretentious; on the

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<sup>1</sup> See *CPI*, 532, n. 3.

other, it bears the signature of serious moral inquiry. It is a protean piece of writing that blurs the boundaries between fiction, autobiography and polemics, and it leaves the reader perched between Eliot's self-deprecation and self-assertion.

The story, particularly its first section, is significant for bringing embarrassment and shame, levity and seriousness, manners and morals into tension. Eeldrop provides case studies of three men who may be understood in two ways: the first way involves classification according to social structures and codes, while the second entails glimpsing an individuating reality on which public interests can cast no light. It is the quest for the second type of insight which drives Eeldrop and Appleplex into wicked suburbs:

Both were endeavoring to escape not the commonplace, respectable or even the domestic, but the too well pigeon-holed, too taken-for-granted, too highly systematized areas, and – in the language of those whom they sought to avoid – they wished ‘to apprehend the human soul in its concrete individuality.’ (*CPI*, 526)

This insight, however, does not lend itself to positive expression. What the characters learn about one man cannot be transferred to another, nor can it be ‘recalled in words’ (526). And so, in order to limn the contours of their observations, they must define this knowledge against the kind of experience and thinking they wish to avoid. To put it more concretely, Eeldrop and Appleplex attempt to convey the spiritual importance of individuality, morality, and shame concomitant with tragedy by highlighting the transience and triviality of social phenomena such as decorum, status, and public interest.

In what follows, I first consider moments of embarrassment and disgust in the story, and how these affective experiences impede the humility necessary to appreciate a given situation's moral reality. This is demonstrated implicitly as Eeldrop's own sense of embarrassment and disgust threatens to occlude his insight into the Spaniard as a ‘unique...soul’ (526). It is also demonstrated explicitly in Eeldrop's account of Bistwick, whose family's sense of public disgrace precludes their recognizing Bistwick's spiritual

shame. The second section pays particular attention to Eeldrop's valuation of private truth and fixed moral standards. Here, the oblique reference to 'orthodox theology' is read against the backdrop of *Purgatory* 16 (which concerns free will and absolute moral laws) as well as the burgeoning concern with morality and evil that surfaces in some of Eliot's philosophy and theology reviews of this period. The third section juxtaposes Eeldrop's remarks about tragedy alongside 'Thomas Middleton', 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', and *Sweeney Agonistes*, and takes account of Eliot's remarks about the relationship between tragedy and morality. What emerges from the comparison is Eliot's humility in affirming the individual soul's answerability to an absolute moral law.

### **'Generalized men': embarrassment, disgust, and public dishonour**

Eeldrop's presentation of what constitutes his subject's 'unique soul' is preceded by a broad brushstroke sketch of what constitutes that subject's public self: a fat Spaniard with poor table manners and questionable fashion sense.<sup>1</sup> Whether the Spaniard's mannerisms and appearance are cause for embarrassment to himself we do not know, but it is apparent that Eeldrop feels the man's behaviour to be lacking in delicacy: 'he made unpleasant noises while eating'; 'his way of crumbling bread between fat fingers made me extremely nervous'; '[h]e was oppressively gross and vulgar' (*CPI*, 526). These particulars are sufficient for Eeldrop to cast the Spaniard as a 'type' and to distance himself tacitly from this type. Psychologically, however, Eeldrop's attempt at othering the Spaniard is more complex. While his description of the bodily presence and actions of the man is marked by nervousness and disgust and thus constitutes a visceral response of self-protection, there occurs at the same time a process of abjection which involves Eeldrop in what repulses him.

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<sup>1</sup> James Longenbach claims that the model for the 'fat Spaniard' was a Spanish Priest named Maria de Elizondo with whom Eliot and Pound dined, and who also makes an appearance in Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. See Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 154.

In *Hiding from Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum explains that one of the main functions of disgust is to reinforce boundaries:

Disgust concerns the borders of the body: it focuses on the prospect that a problematic substance may be incorporated into the self. For many items and many people, the mouth is an especially charged border. The disgusting has to be seen as alien: one's own bodily products are not viewed as disgusting so long as they are inside one's own body, although they become disgusting after they leave it.<sup>1</sup>

The practical value of disgust lies in averting a specific kind of physical danger. At an ontological level, however, disgust creates distance between the subject and what it finds repulsive: it is a strategy to stave off decay and animal mortality. What necessitates this strategy in the first place is an undesired affinity between the subject and the object of its disgust. 'In an aversion to animals,' writes Walter Benjamin, 'the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized.'<sup>2</sup> Building on Benjamin's insight, Giorgio Agamben sees disgust as a site of conflict where the subject becomes implicated in a warring movement: identification with and detachment from the loathsome object. 'Whoever experiences disgust has in some way recognized himself in the object of his loathing and fears being recognized in turn. The man who experiences disgust recognizes himself in an alterity that cannot be assumed – that is, he subjectifies himself in an absolute desubjectification.'<sup>3</sup>

These terms – subjectification and desubjectification – are otherwise dichotomised as 'self-possession' and 'self-loss', and though Agamben employs them in the grave context of

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<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 88.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), 50. Also pertinent is Émile Durkheim's argument that '[t]he pure is made out of the impure, and reciprocally'. Durkheim, *Elementary forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1915), 411. Eliot twice reviewed this book between 1916 and 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1999), 106-107.

his study on Auschwitz testimony, they nonetheless have application in much less serious situations and operate in ways far from ‘absolute’. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, many of Eliot’s early poems are preoccupied with the fragile balance between self-possession and its opposite – ‘My self-possession gutters’ is a line from ‘Portrait of a Lady’ emblematic of this tension (*PTSE1*, 13). Eeldrop’s reaction to the Spaniard’s conduct balances on the same knife-edge, since he suffers discomfiture on account of his companion’s unrefined eating habits. On the one hand, this unease stems from the porous boundaries that disgust establishes: subconsciously sensing a danger of proximity or even likeness, Eeldrop feels the need to record his repugnance for the man. On the other hand, Eeldrop’s nervousness is conditioned by his awareness of being in public and, more to the point, being seen in the company of the Spaniard. In this light, Eeldrop’s remarks are a declaration that, though the Spaniard might remain oblivious to his own vulgarity, Eeldrop himself recognises the indecorous crumbing of the bread as such. Following Charles Darwin’s analysis, Eeldrop seems to possess the virtue of modesty: ‘He who is modest, and blushes easily at acts of this nature, does so because they are breaches of a firmly and wisely established etiquette. This is indeed shown by the derivation of the word *modest* from *modus*, a measure of standard of behaviour.’<sup>1</sup> Embarrassment, as Goffman observes, is not always felt by the person guilty of a ‘*gaffe* or *faux pas*’, and this lack of social sensitivity often leads those in the presence of the offender to register the emotion on his/her behalf: ‘When an individual finds himself in a situation which ought to make him blush, others present usually will blush with and for him, though he may not have sufficient sense of shame or appreciation of circumstances to blush on his own account.’<sup>2</sup>

In ‘Hysteria’, a similar kind of embarrassment-by-association occurs. Eliot’s only collected prose-poem centres on the awkwardness of a speaker who feels implicated in the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, ed. Francis Darwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 354.

<sup>2</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 99-100.

boisterous laughter of his female companion. Her ‘hysteria’ becomes his own as he allows the microscopic to become cosmic: mere teeth evolve into stars, and the woman’s throat becomes a cavernous and threatening space in which he is trapped.

As she laughed I was aware of becoming involved in her laughter and being part of it, until her teeth were only accidental stars with a talent for squad-drill. I was drawn in by short gasps, inhaled at each momentary recovery, lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles. (*PTSE1*, 26)

The sense of claustrophobia underscores the speaker’s apprehension of a boundary collapse between himself and the woman. Yet, in embarrassment – as in disgust – the experience of identification coincides with the impulse to resist it. Ostensibly a loss of face is at stake; implicitly, an emasculating loss of control. The title word, with its etymological and historical gender-bias, threatens to qualify not only the convulsively laughing woman, but also the male speaker. His ‘decision’ to stop the ‘shaking of her breasts’ simultaneously asserts an effort to reclaim control and to maintain what is the most obvious difference between himself and the woman: their gender. This specious redirection of focus – away from the actual embarrassing act (laughter) to an unrelated aspect of the agent who is responsible for the embarrassing act – constitutes an *ad hominem* (*feminam*) attack comparable to the one which Eeldrop subliminally levels at his companion. The fact that the man has poor table manners has nothing to do with his nationality, yet Eeldrop regards the detail as proof of his belonging to a ‘type’ to be encountered in ‘any town of Provincial Spain’ (*CPI*, 526). Disgust then signals Eeldrop’s subconscious desire to dissociate himself from the Spaniard; embarrassment prompts his need to declare an awareness of impropriety. Stereotyping is a third step in separation. Just as the short story invites one to infer the subtly elided facts that Eeldrop is neither vulgar nor Spanish, the prose-poem reveals its speaker’s unconscious attempt to establish a similarly illogical connection between hysterical behaviour and having breasts. In



‘Hysteria’ the speaker is driven not only to maintain self-possession but to achieve this through control of the other. To use Agamben’s words, he subjectifies himself in desubjectification.

In the story’s second case, the apparently awkward position of Bistwick’s relatives also predicates on their proximity to the source of improper conduct. But while Eeldrop’s embarrassment is superficial and short-lived, the family’s sense of taint rests on a deeper, more intimate connection – hence the word ‘disgrace’. Disgrace (or shame) need not only be felt by a person responsible for disgraceful behaviour, but by anyone who shares a close connection with him or her. In the *Rhetoric*, for instance, Aristotle writes that

[m]en also feel shame when they are connected with actions or things which entail disgrace, for which either they themselves, or their ancestors, or any others with whom they are closely connected are responsible. In a word, men feel shame for those whom they themselves respect; such are those mentioned and those who have any relation to them.<sup>1</sup>

Approaching the question from an empirical rather than a cultural point of view, David Hume recognized intimate association with a disreputable person as sufficient grounds for the experience of disgrace. In his account of the indirect passions (pride, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, pity) in *The Treatise on Human Understanding*, he argues that we may experience pride or shame not only on the basis of our inherent qualities or defects, but also on the basis of our relation to other people or things: ‘The passions looking farther, comprehend whatever objects are in the least allied or related to us. Our country, family, children, relations, riches, houses, gardens, horses, dogs, clothes; any of these may become a cause of pride or of humility [shame].’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The ‘Art’ of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (London: William Heinemann, 1926), 219.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 279. (I supply modern spelling.) Though this section in the *Treatise* deals explicitly with the terms ‘pride’ and ‘humility’, the latter is substitutable in modern usage for ‘shame’.

What brings these two disparate perspectives on disgrace together is a concern for public opinion. Aristotle reflects that we experience dishonour before those whom we esteem. Hume, whose other three conditions for pride or shame are implicitly grounded in an awareness of wider social contexts, overtly links his third and fifth conditions to the gaze of others: the object (or person) who gives rise to pain or pleasure and the subsequent shame or pride must be obvious to others; societal norms are significant in affecting our experience of the object as agreeable or disagreeable.<sup>1</sup> These two stipulations have bearing on Bistwick's situation. That the 'generous-minded' outsider recognizes the infelicity of the situation indicates its obviousness; that the relatives are disgraced indicates the breach of a norm, at least within their circles. According to Gabriele Taylor, norms may be conditioned in three ways: first, by what a person might expect in relation to external circumstances (financial or social, for example); second, by the individual's capacities or defects (thus what they believe they can or cannot achieve); third, by one's awareness of the expectations of others.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, the last norm is teased out in those kindred poems that deal with the scandals of kin and close associates, 'Aunt Helen' and 'Cousin Nancy'. In 'Aunt Helen' the reader encounters similar tensions hinted at in Bistwick's story: there is the contrast between upper and lower classes, decorum and impropriety, poise and baseness. But what is missing from the poem is a note of indignity; in fact, the tone is arch and urbane.

...Now when [my aunt] died there was silence in heaven  
 And silence at her end of the street.  
 The shutters were drawn and the undertaker wiped his feet –  
 He was aware that this sort of thing had occurred before.  
 The dogs were handsomely provided for,  
 But shortly afterwards the parrot died too.  
 The Dresden clock continued ticking on the mantelpiece,

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 215; Hume, *Treatise*, 291-293.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 40.

And the footman sat upon the dining-table  
Holding the second housemaid on his knees –  
Who had always been so careful while her mistress lived. (*PTSEI*, 23)

The first-person speaker witnesses the frolicking of a footman and maid with equanimity perhaps because, like the undertaker, he was accustomed to ‘this sort of thing’. Yet a more likely explanation is that no norms have been disrupted. The death of Aunt Helen is respectfully observed by neighbours and the heavens, the upmarket house is kept in order, and the dogs are dutifully looked after. Only a mild tremor of disturbance registers when the parrot dies: the ‘But’ at the beginning of line nine for a moment registers the possibility of an unscripted event. But in a poem of uneven scansion, unrhymed line-endings, and thirteen lines, the conjunction stops short of actually introducing a *volta*: this world is not subject to the possible turns of Italian sonnets. Despite the death of the parrot and Aunt Helen, things carry on as always: the Dresden clock keeps ticking and the servants keep at their philandering though now more openly. Given the preservation of appearances (‘the shutters were drawn’), there is no danger of contagion. The speaker is doubly distanced from the servants because of his social superiority and because the risqué deeds remain covered up – they cannot in the dimmest way reflect on the nephew of Aunt Helen.

In ‘Cousin Nancy’ (*PTSEI*, 24) there is more of a threat to the *status quo*, and it is perhaps worth highlighting Eliot’s anxiety to point out to an anthologist that ‘emphatically...you must understand that the lady in the verses is an entirely imaginary character and in no way a portrait of any of my female relations’ (*L3*, 808). Violating the New England landscape and customs, the neoteric Nancy Ellicott stirs uncertainty in her aunts. It is telling that this is all they experience; despite Nancy’s disruptive modernity the ‘unalterable law’ of Arnold’s aesthetics and Emerson’s self-reliance remains unchallenged, at least in the lives of the aunts. The tone is characteristically tongue-in-cheek, and one senses

the friction between the jagged lines that depict the movements of Nancy and the stiff correctness of the last three lines which invoke not only the named guardians, but Meredith and, by extension, the unchallengeable decrees of God. While this stability is undermined, it is also kept intact. The aunts are neither ruffled nor outraged but only uncertain – the luxury of those who are not implicated in scandal.

Such is not the fortune of the prostitutes in ‘Sweeney Erect’ – a poem that belongs to the same period of creative output as ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’ and also shares the story’s juxtaposition of manners and morals. Disturbed by the shrieks coming from Sweeney’s room,

The ladies of the corridor  
Find themselves involved, disgraced,  
Call witness to their principles  
And deprecate the lack of taste. (*PTSEI*, 37)

The word ‘taste’ has that distinct flavour of Eliot’s early poetry in which the speaker is acutely aware of society and its rules. We are told that ‘*hysteria* might easily be misunderstood’ (my emphasis), and that this could lead to the diminished estimation of Mrs. Turner’s house in the eyes of those who hide behind the line’s passive construction. The irony of a brothel worried about its reputation aside, the verbal nod to Eliot’s earlier prose-poem and the recasting of ‘involved’ within a comparable context gestures at the prostitutes’ reluctance to be tainted by association.

More mutedly, Bistwick drags his family name through the mud since he disrupts all three social norms. In view of his inferred standing, privilege and education (first norm), his relatives may expect a marriage comparable to Wolstrip’s, who ‘consummat[es] the union of two of the best families in Philadelphia’ (*CPI*, 527); this is hinted at in their ‘regard for Bistwick’s interests’ – interests which turn out to be their own. To make a case for the transgression of the second norm might seem less feasible. But when one considers that a

parent may feel pride or shame in a child as product of the parent (odd though the concept seems), the disgrace experienced by Bistwick's relatives is in some measure an expression of personal failure. Taylor explains that

[a father] may think of his clever son as his creation, on the ground perhaps that the son's cleverness is an inheritance from him, or because he created the condition in which such cleverness could flourish. This would be parallel to his being proud of the beautiful house not on the grounds of just ownership but because he has made it beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

In Bistwick's case, however, the third norm's breach carries the most weight. The relatives' 'collective feeling of family disgrace' (*CPI*, 526) is a confirmation that public dishonour has been visited upon them. On the one hand and most obviously, their disgrace is negative in character: it points to loss and failure. On the other hand, the disgrace inheres in the family's qualitatively positive association with its newest member – Bistwick's wife, the housemaid. The union is at once an expansion of the Bistwick tribe and a dilution of what they stand for. In his first review of Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (*CPI*, 421), Eliot states that totems, emblems or insignia – material tokens of communal belonging – are more than 'heraldic crests' which merely signify an association with local flora and fauna. Rather, the 'cockatoo men are cockatoos; they partake in a common nature from which other men are excluded'. The totem, which is eventually replaced by a name, has a dual function: firstly, the establishment or declaration of an identity with which certain positive traits are associated (which occasion pride in the family name); secondly, the preservation of that identity through the exclusion of unwanted connections or the inclusion of desired ones. But as *East Coker* makes clear, legacies are not permanent:

Houses live and die: there is a time for building  
And a time for living and for generation

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *Pride*, 29.

And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane  
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots  
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto. (*PTSEI*, 185)

One significant difference between embarrassment and shame is duration. The fact that embarrassment cannot only be overcome but forgotten (Nussbaum characterises it as fleeting and often inconsequential) is what allows comedy to end in social integration and unity; shame's endurance and inexpugnability are what drives tragic heroes into a state of exile, whether actual or mental.<sup>1</sup> While the conditions which made an act embarrassing in the first place might change and so nullify the embarrassment, shame signals an irrevocable breach. And so, seen within the story's binary conflict between public conduct against private, moral conduct, the disgrace of the Bistwick family stands closer to embarrassment than shame. This is not to say that their experience of the situation is necessarily laughable or petty. The Eliot family's shock at the union of T. S. Eliot and Vivien Haigh-Wood was not unwarranted, nor was Eliot's sense of familial pride negligible.<sup>2</sup> But the story implies that such responses, which include the shame-hypersensitivity of New England Puritanism, dwarf against the 'awful importance of the ruin of a life' (*CPI*, 527).

### **'Unique being': private truth, free will, and absolute laws**

Eeldrop dogmatically declares that neither family nor magnanimous onlookers are in a position to appreciate Bistwick's (or, by extension, the Spaniard's) plight. He does so on the basis of a theory that involves three convictions: first, that private truths are untranslatable;

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<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 204.

<sup>2</sup> For a suggestion of the Eliot family's reaction to Eliot and Vivien's marriage, see Theodora Eliot Smith's letter to her mother in which she deprecates the 'clan attitude' of the family (*L3*, 250-251). Eliot's pride in his lineage is most clearly evinced in the heraldic significance found throughout *East Coker*. Much earlier, a young Eliot wrote in the *Harvard Advocate* with pride of his heritage: 'Nowadays we are thankful that more congenial occupation is open to the industrious gentleman, however needy, than was possible to some of our New England forbears. If along with greater luxury, with more generosity and geniality than was theirs, we have preserved the spirit of our old plebeian aristocracy, we should give them the grace of recognition' (*CPI*, 23). Proving his consistency, Eliot remarks in a letter that 'ancestors' is weak when wanting to suggest family pride and that 'forbears' is better (*L5*, 182).

second, that the significance of private truths suffers in the absence of a doctrinal belief in free will and absolute laws; third, that tragedy cannot be understood in relation to public codes and classes.

[T]he essential is unique. Perhaps that is why it is so neglected: because it is useless. What we learned about that Spaniard is incapable of being applied to any other Spaniard, or even recalled in words. With the decline of orthodox theology and its admirable theory of the soul, the unique importance of events has vanished. A man is only important as he is classed. Hence there is no tragedy, or no appreciation of tragedy, which is the same thing. (*CPI*, 526)

The passage is crucial for an appreciation of the text's separation both of public and personal transgression, and for grasping the ensuing states of embarrassment and shame. The terse, tripartite observation is at once diagnostic and remedial. While Eeldrop laments the lapse of conditions which would enable the apprehension of the 'human soul in its concrete individuality' (526), his and Appleplex's investigations gesture at an effort to recover such conditions.

The first conviction – that private truths are singular, individual and untransferable to other contexts – resonates with certain remarks in Eliot's philosophical writings. The earliest iterations about 'private truth' occur in two graduate essays, 'Degrees of Reality' (1913) and 'The Validity of Artificial Distinctions' (1914), written at Harvard and Oxford respectively. It is also articulated in the conclusion of his PhD dissertation:

I remember a phrase of Eucken's, a phrase which had a certain *entrain* about it: *es gibt keine Privatwahrheiten* (there are no private truths). I do not recall the context, and am not concerned with the meaning which the phrase had there; but I should reverse the decision, and say: All significant truths are private truths. As they become public they cease to become truths; they become facts, or at best, part of the public character; or at worst; catchwords. (*CPI*, 377)

This phrasing is almost identical to that of the earlier essays and further corresponds in a general feeling of dissatisfaction: all three contexts suggest a deep scepticism about the categories, classes, and taxonomies by which philosophy attempts the ordering of knowledge and experience. In 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' this dissatisfaction is directed at social contingencies which, while aiding understanding of a situation's general significance, inevitably detract from the essential nature of a singularity.

Whatever else 'overflowed' into the story, the sceptical epistemology of F. H. Bradley seems evident. In a passage from *Appearance and Reality* made famous by one of *The Waste Land's* 'Notes', Bradley holds that private experience remains sealed off to the external world:

the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.... No experience can lie open to inspection from outside; no direct guarantee of identity is possible. Both our knowledge of sameness, and our way of communication, are indirect and inferential. They must make the circuit, and must use the symbol, of bodily change. If a common ruler of souls could give to any one a message from the inside, such a message could never be handed on but by alterations of bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Eliot's story suggests a nuanced redirection away from solipsism towards a theological background against which subjectivity may be defined. For Eeldrop, the gulf between public and private truth can only be explained under the aspect of eternity:

The important fact is that something is done which cannot be undone...For the man's neighbors the important fact is what the man killed her with? And at precisely what time? And who found the body? For the 'enlightened public' the case is merely evidence for the Drink question, or Unemployment, or some other category of things to be reformed. But the mediaeval world, insisting on *the eternity of punishment*, expressed something nearer the truth. (*CPI*, 527, my emphasis)

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<sup>1</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1899), 346-347.



The ‘mediaeval’ worldview mentioned here joins up with ‘orthodox theology and its admirable theory of the soul’. Very likely, the latter phrase is a muted allusion to Dante’s formulation of the Aristotelian conception of the soul in Canto 16 of the *Purgatorio* – a passage which had special significance for Eliot. In the bilingual Dent edition of *The Divine Comedy* used during his undergraduate years, he underscored lines 96-98 on both sides – a means of emphasis applied very infrequently across the book.<sup>1</sup> In Eliot’s own writing, the passage is mentioned or alluded to six times (excluding ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’): in ‘An American Critic’ (an unsigned 1916 review of Paul Elmer More’s *Aristocracy and Justice*; *CPI*, 407), ‘The Borderline of Prose’ (*CPI*, 539), ‘Dante as a Spiritual Leader’ (*CP2*, 233), the first of Eliot’s Clark Lectures (*CP2*, 617), ‘Animula’ (*PTSEI*, 105), and ‘Dante’ (1929) in which Eliot supplies his own prose translation:

From the hands of Him who loves her before she is, there issues like a little child that plays, with weeping and laughter, the simple soul, that knows nothing except that, come from the hands of a glad creator, she turns willingly to everything that delights her. First she tastes the flavour of a trifling good; then is beguiled, and pursues it, if neither guide nor check withhold her. Therefore laws were needed as a curb; a ruler was needed, who should at least see afar the tower of the true City. (*CP3*, 719)

The passage forms part of Marco Lombardo’s discourse on free will, which is prompted by the Pilgrim’s inquiry into the cause of evil. Rejecting the notion that vice and virtue are bound by external forces or under the influence of ‘heaven’, Lombardo affirms that man is personally responsible for his own actions: ‘light has been giv’n to you for good and evil, / with Free Will.... Hence, if the present world go wrong, the cause / is in yourselves, and should in you be sought.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Corroboration of this is found in Henry Ware Eliot’s letter to his brother on 12 September, 1935 (*L7*, 759).

<sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Italian Text with a Translation in English Blank Verse and Commentary, Volume 2: Purgatorio*, trans. Courtney Langdon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 16.75-83. Hereafter *Pur*.

Dante's complex absorption of Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy aside, one may recognise that the passage pivots on the relation between personal responsibility and divine laws. Given these concerns, the oblique reference to Dante's theory of the soul represents a desirable countermeasure to the generalised and vacillating ways in which individuals are weighed up. Eeldrop's painting of modern life depicts the individual as his/her own source of satisfaction. The practical, radiating value of a life returns upon itself in an economy of public self-fulfilment: 'this cataloguing [according to social function/position] is not only satisfactory to other people for practical purposes, it is sufficient to [people] themselves for their "life of the spirit"' (*CPI*, 527). But in a system founded upon absolute laws and personal accountability, the individual soul has recourse neither to social institutions (which supply relative standards of judgement) nor to social categories (which supply a relative identity). Put differently, Eeldrop's 'orthodox theology' may be understood as a doctrine which sees subjectivity uniquely determined in relation to values that are common to all humanity.<sup>1</sup> It is a notion that would explicitly resurface in Eliot's first Heraclitus epigraph to *Four Quartets*: 'Although the Word (Logos) is common to all, most men live as though they had each a private wisdom of his own' (*PTSEI*, 905-906).

Eliot's belief in an absolute moral law and humanity's fallibility is also evidenced in his book reviewing of the latter half of the 1910s. One such example is his review of *Aristocracy and Justice*, which also contains a reference to *Purgatory* 16. In the piece, Eliot gives ready ascent to More's demand for discipline and restraint, and sides with the author against the legacy of Romanticism, which is seen to extend into politics, art, philosophy and morality alike. He also stands with More on the 'necessary limitations of civilisation':

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<sup>1</sup> Something of this orthodox theology is suggested in Eliot's letter to Bonamy Dobrée of 1927 (*L3*, 820): '...if there is no fixed truth, there is no fixed object for the will to tend to. If truth is always changing, then there is nothing to do but sit down and watch the pictures. Any distinctions one makes are more or less arbitrary. I should say that it was at any rate essential for Religion that we should have the conception of an immutable object or Reality the knowledge of which shall be the final object of that will; and there can be no permanent reality if there is no apprehension of truth.... You cannot conceive of truth at all, the word has no meaning, except by conceiving of it as something permanent.'

[More's] humanism is based upon the belief that Nature is generally unfavourable to man; that nothing is more fragile than civilisation, nothing harder to mend after the slightest fracture. At the bottom of man's heart there is always the beast, resentful of restraints of civilised society, ready to spring out at the instant this restraint relaxes. Nature, even human nature, is impatient of civilization – which is something more precious than comfort, or physical health, or popular education, or even life and liberty. As a matter of fact, the human soul – *l'anima semplicetta* – is neither good nor bad; but in order to be good, in order to be human, requires *discipline*: *Onde convenne legge per fren porre...* (CP1, 407)

Eliot's review focuses on a chapter called 'The New Morality', in which More inveighs against the modern tendency to prize social justice over personal integrity. For More, the 'New Morality' or 'humanitarianism' is a regrettable consequence of eighteenth-century deism which, as Stephen L. Tanner explains, is at odds with a dualism that comprehends 'the supernatural realm of experience' and 'the reality of evil within the human heart'.<sup>1</sup> In a brief account of the 'slow drift from medieval religion to humanitarianism', More sketches the conditions he believes to have given rise to the New Morality.<sup>2</sup> Early Christianity was typified by a valuation of the eternal over the temporal. This either/or morality hinged on belief in eternal joy or eternal punishment. Though a divorce between 'practice and precept' meant that for many believers certain commands were not set in stone, 'more sensitive minds' saw moral law as pure and absolute. For these latter, the thought of the 'soul naked before a judging God must have created a tremendous anxiety':

Morality was obedience and integrity; it scorned the world for an ideal of inner righteousness; *it created a sense of individual responsibility for every word and deed*; and, say what we will, there is something magnificent in this contempt for the

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Tanner, *Paul Elmer More: Literary Criticism as the History of Ideas* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Elmer More, *Aristocracy and Justice: Shelburne Essays*, Ninth Series (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 199.

reckoning of other men beside that eternal flame which [‘]lives and speaks aloft by those pure eyes, / And perfect witness of all-judging Jove.[’]<sup>1</sup>

After this period, More identifies a time during which the Church of the Middle Ages interposed itself between man and God so as to mitigate the harshness of the abovementioned doctrine of absolutes. Penances, pardons and Purgatory (‘the almost hypocritical compromise of Catholicism’) were offered ‘in place of the terrible paradox of irrevocable judgement’. But with the Reformation, and particularly its Calvinistic Puritanical offshoots, such compromising mediations were eliminated in order to ‘bring man face to face with the awful abstraction he had created’. However, this revolution faltered because ‘human nature could not endure the rigidity of its own logic’. Instead of further compromises to faith, the very foundation of faith was drawn into question. According to More, the inevitable consequence was Deism: ‘God was stript altogether of his judicial and moral attributes and reduced to a kind of, immanent, all-benevolent force in nature.’ For More, this point in the eighteenth century marked a significant loss of perspective: ‘With the idea of an avenging deity and a supernatural test there disappeared also the *sense of deep personal responsibility*; the very notion of a *radical and fundamental difference between good and evil was lost*.’

More subsequently shifts his attention to present-day ‘humanitarianism’. He acknowledges that the New Morality achieves some measure of good, since it expands – at least at an institutional level – our capacity for sympathy, which is witnessed in the elimination of some barbaric practices and the implementation of more even-handed justice. But the benefit to society comes at a cost to the individual. More thus remains wary of a kind of sympathy too narrowly concerned with the public good because it exposes the individual to an insidious and unseen evil:

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<sup>1</sup> More, *Aristocracy*, 199-200, my emphasis here and where it occurs below.

‘[S]ocial sympathy’ erected into a theory which leaves out of account the responsibility of the individual and seeks to throw the blame of evil on the laws and on society, though it may effect desirable reforms here and there in institutions, is bound to leave the individual weakened in his powers of resistance against the temptations which can never be eliminated from human life. The whole effect of calling sympathy justice and putting it in the place of judgement is to relax the fibre of character and nourish the passions at the expense of reason and the will.<sup>1</sup>

That Eliot also harboured grave doubts about social progress and ‘humanitarianism’ may be recognized even without considering his post-conversion stance. In a graduate paper he castigates Walter Lipmann’s anti-dogmatic dogma for its commitment to ‘the fallacy of Progress’ (*CPI*, 94-95). The dismissal of Lipmann extends into an attack on Unitarianism and its belief in progress: ‘as soon as a man makes of Progress something independent of human need and human meaning...then he is losing his hold upon social reality; he is become an intellectual drunkard.’<sup>2</sup> In the syllabus for his 1916 Extension Lectures on French literature, Eliot writes disparagingly that humanitarianism equals ‘belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature’ (*CPI*, 471). His review of *Reflections on Violence* describes as ‘healthy’ Georges Sorel’s longing for a ‘narrow, intolerant, *creative* society with sharp divisions’, and sees it as the necessary attitude of someone ‘sick with [his] own knowledge of history, with the dissolving lines of liberal thought, with humanitarianism’ (*CPI*, 559, Eliot’s emphasis). And in his poetry, Eliot pits the caveman-like Sweeney against Emersonian enlightenment and self-reliance.

What these writings have in common is a deep scepticism about human perfectibility. Underpinning Eliot’s denigration of liberalism and progress is his profound belief in original sin, a belief that was strengthened and sustained by his reading of Dante, Pascal, Stendhal,

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<sup>1</sup> More, *Aristocracy*. 209-211.

<sup>2</sup> Belief in progress is the fifth point of doctrine for Unitarianism according to its founder, James Freeman Clarke. See Clarke, *Vexed Questions in Theology: A Series of Essays* (Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis, 1886), 16-17.

Dostoevski, Baudelaire, and other writers who were preoccupied with the problem of evil.<sup>1</sup> One such other was T. E. Hulme, whose Preface and Notes to *Reflections on Violence* (1916) Eliot encountered in the year ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’ was published. In his own copy, Eliot underlined the following definition of classicism: ‘man is by nature bad or limited, and can consequently only accomplish anything of value by disciplines, ethical, heroic, or political. In other words, [this system] believes in Original Sin.’<sup>2</sup> Eliot continued to champion Hulme’s ideas (and poetry) in many other pieces of writing, often aligning him with contemporary thinkers who also espoused the classical ideals of discipline and restraint. These include Sorel, Charles Maurras, Julien Benda, Jacques Maritain and, with some qualification, Irving Babbitt. Paul Elmer More’s name also may be added to the list, since Eliot comments on a similarity between More’s theory of dualism and Hulme’s theory of discontinuity.<sup>3</sup> The latter model saw the inorganic, organic and religious as three distinct zones, and Hulme regarded the classicist as one who could look upon this ‘chasm without shuddering’.<sup>4</sup> ‘It is to the immense credit of Hulme,’ Eliot writes in ‘Second Thoughts on Humanism’ (*CP3*, 621), ‘that he found out for himself that there is an *absolute* to which Man can *never* attain. For the modern humanist, as for the romantic, “the problem of evil disappears, the conception of sin disappears.”’

In ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’ the problem of evil is very much in the foreground, since the title characters ‘aim at experience in the particular centres in which alone it is evil’ (527). It is also a question that Eliot dwelt on in his philosophy reviews for the *International Journal of Ethics* between 1916 and 1918. Of the fifteen reviews he wrote for the *IJE* during

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, ‘Baudelaire in our Time’: ‘All first-rate poetry is occupied with morality: this is the lesson of Baudelaire. More than any poet of his time, Baudelaire was aware of what most mattered: the problem of good and evil’ (*CP2*, 306).

<sup>2</sup> T. E. Hulme, ‘Introduction’, in Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. and intro. T. E. Hulme (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1916), viii-ix.

<sup>3</sup> See B. A. Harries, ‘The Rare Contact: A Correspondence between T. S. Eliot and P. E. More’, in *Theology* 75, no. 136 (1972): 143.

<sup>4</sup> T. E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924), 4.

this period, five include reference to an author's handling of the subject of evil. The 1916 review of Hastings Rashdall's *Conscience and Christ* is the most significant, if not the most personal. Among pieces typified by their detached and even-handed dealing it is by far the most antagonistic. Eliot notes that Rashdall exacts sacrifices from both theology and ethics, and he proceeds at once to attack the 'middle-class conscience' to which the 'teaching of Jesus is gradually assimilated' (*CPI*, 428). He next addresses the author's facile dismissal of heaven and hell, and the consequent suggestion that 'the moral teaching of Jesus can be valued quite independently of eschatological considerations' (*CPI*, 428). Eliot here targets Rashdall's second lecture, in which the author propounds an 'ethical' rather than an eschatological interpretation of Christ's life and words. Rashdall holds that '[i]t would be as absurd to reject or to disparage the ethical ideal of Jesus a priori because He entertained eschatological hopes *which we cannot share*, as it would be to reject a priori the metaphysical conceptions of Plato because we have outgrown his physics'.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that Christ mistakenly 'may have thought that the physical Universe was on the eve of a vast catastrophe', but that this does not invalidate his teaching. Such a stance not only undermines the biblical apocalypse but also the divinity of Christ. It is unsurprising to find Rashdall conceding an affinity between his theology and that of Unitarianism.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot's repugnance towards the faith of his family is well known. He saw Unitarianism as 'bad preparation for brass tacks like birth, copulation and death, hell, heaven and insanity' (*L3*, 228) – words that would return, somewhat altered, in *Sweeney Agonistes* (*PTSE1*, 122).<sup>3</sup> Rashdall's ethics, which Eliot regards as a watered-down Unitarianism, is tantamount to a heretical disavowal of the hardship that the spiritual life necessitates. Hell, to isolate just one of these brass tacks, is fundamental to Eliot's later Christian conception of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rashdall, *Conscience*, 72, my emphasis. Also see my Introduction, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Rashdall, *Conscience*, 277.

<sup>3</sup> Also see *The Cocktail Party* for the contrast between Celia's upbringing ('anything wrong...Was either bad form, or was psychological') and her eventual 'sense of sin' (*CPP*, 414-415).

world. In 'Second Thoughts on Humanism' (CP3, 617), he writes that 'Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them'. In 'Baudelaire' (CP4, 162-163) he considers the glory of humanity to be divided equally between its 'capacity for salvation' and its 'capacity for damnation'. Writing to Paul Elmer More in 1930, he expresses his shock at More's 'assertion that God did not make Hell' (L5, 209-210). And in *After Strange Gods*, Eliot rejects the hell of Pound's *Cantos* since a hell without dignity implies a Heaven without dignity: 'If you do not distinguish between individual responsibility and circumstances in Hell, *between essential Evil and social accidents*, then Heaven (if any) implied will be equally trivial and accidental' (CP5, 34, my emphasis). These texts reveal a profound faith in the existence of eternal laws, which is largely but not exclusively informed by Eliot's religious belief. 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' shows this preoccupation with personal accountability in the face of fixed laws to be manifest long before Eliot's Christian turn.

### **'A different world from ours': ethics and morality**

Eeldrop claims that tragedy cannot be understood in classes and categories or, to use Eliot's terms in *Knowledge and Experience*, according to 'facts' and 'catchwords'. But the subversive irony of the story makes it difficult to pinpoint what exactly makes the Spaniard's confession tragic. The point at which Eeldrop brings tragedy into his three-part equation is also the point at which the first case gives way to the second. The transition between the Spaniard's individuating truth and the unhappy marriage of Bistwick seems to place them on a continuum. On the one hand, the text may be proffering a gambit. We are invited, despite any contextual clarity, to see the 'ruin' marriage has wreaked on these two lives. We are perhaps also tempted to speculate that Eeldrop is unhappily married given the dire terms in which he reflects on the two cases. And, because of the resemblance between creature and creator, we might think Eeldrop's biased perception is a product of Eliot's own tortured



marital life. These speculations are drawn out by 'Eeldrop and Appleplex', a text which Christopher Ricks calls 'a deep, witty, and honourably uneasy exploration of prejudice, of stereotyping and of the classifying of people'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of its remarkable effects is eliciting from the reader that which it explicitly opposes: an irritable reaching after socio-biographical facts and reasons to make sense of situations which transcend those very facts and reasons.

On the other hand, the proximity established between the Spaniard and Bistwick intimates that tragedy may take hold even in the most banal scenarios such as unhappy marriages. The kind of tragedy here adumbrated by Eeldrop belongs to the kind Eliot would identify in *The Changeling*: not that of the 'naturally bad' but of the 'irresponsible and undeveloped nature, caught in the consequences of its own action'.

In every age and in every civilization there are instances of the same thing: the unmoral nature, suddenly trapped in the inexorable toils of morality – of morality not made by man but by Nature – and forced to take the consequences of an act which it had planned light-heartedly. Beatrice is not a moral creature; she becomes moral only by becoming damned. Our conventions are not the same as those which Middleton assumed for his play. But the possibility of that frightful discovery of morality remains permanent. (*CP3*, 123-124)

The passage corresponds with 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' both in its separation of temporary, man-made laws and enduring 'Natural' laws, and also in the belief that any act can have lasting moral consequences. And though there is no direct reference to *Purgatory* 16, its influence can also be discerned in this passage. The 'undeveloped nature' of Beatrice correlates in some measure to the newly-created soul which is 'simple' and 'unaware'. Dante depicts the soul, in its naivety, turning to pleasures and 'trivial goods' (the 'changing lights and noise' of 'Animula' [*PTSEI*, 105]) without proper concern for the consequences;

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<sup>1</sup> Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, 115.

Beatrice, as characterised by Eliot, pursues her interests 'light-heartedly'. As her actions inaugurate a morality that 'remains permanent', so the actions of Eeldrop's subjects have indelible significance for the individuals involved: '[t]he important fact is that for the man the act is eternal' (*L1*, 527).

Moreover, Middleton's and Heywood's *The Changeling* also pivots on life-destroying unions. Acting upon her hatred for Alonzo (her fiancé) and her desire for Alsemero, Beatrice sets in motion a series of tragic events. Enlisting the help of the murderous De Flores, whom she also detests, Beatrice disposes of her betrothed and so removes the main impediment in her pursuit of Alsemero. But De Flores leverages the assassination for sex. The union between them is as much moral as physical. Beatrice's desperate attempts to avoid being discovered as a compromised woman are futile, which the pseudo-comic elements of disguise and trickery highlight. The play's climax already occurs in Act III.iv, and all subsequent machinations on Beatrice's part serve only to delay the inevitable. She can neither escape the consequences of her actions, nor can she find solace in her social standing. De Flores is unsparing in his assessment:

Look but into your conscience, read me there,  
'Tis a true book, you'll find me there your equal:  
Push, fly not to your birth, but settle you  
In what the act has made you, y'are no more now;  
You must forget your parentage to me:  
Y'are the deed's creature; by that name  
You lost your first condition, and I challenge you,  
As peace and innocence has turn'd you out,  
And made you one with me. (III.iv.127-139)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977). The passage bears comparison with Mrs Carghill's words to Lord Claverton in *The Elder Statesman* (*CPP*, 553): 'Our relations were intense enough, I think, / To have given me one or two insights into you.... But you touched my soul – / Pawed it, perhaps, and the touch still lingers. / And I've touched yours. / It's frightening to think that we may *always* be together. / There's a phrase I seem to remember reading somewhere: / *Where their fires are not quenched.*'

Joined in sin and shame, De Flores and Beatrice belong to a different order of existence. Their perverse union renders null and void the prelapsarian world envisioned by Alsemero at the play's opening, and it also severs them from the community to which they had belonged.<sup>1</sup> De Flores is instantly alive to the change: 'She that in life and love refuses me, / In death and shame my partner shall be' (III.iv.154-155). Though Beatrice takes longer to realise personal culpability, she too becomes aware of her damnation. In a passage whose cadence and content impress on 'Gerontion', the shamed Beatrice bids her father farewell:

Oh come not near me, sir, I shall defile you:  
I am that of your blood was taken from you  
For your better health; look no more upon't  
But cast it to the ground regardlessly:  
Let the common sewer take it from distinction.  
Beneath the stars, upon yon meteor  
Ever hung my fate, 'mongst things corruptible;  
I ne'er could pluck it from him: my loathing  
Was prophet to the rest, but ne'er believed;  
Mine honour fell with him, and now my life. (V.iii.149-158)

To appreciate Eliot's fascinated horror of *The Changeling* is to recognise the affinity he saw between it and other tragic plays. As a work of 'profound and permanent moral value' it stands above any other Elizabethan play except those of Shakespeare, and thus warrants admission to the company of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Corneille, Racine and Shakespeare – whose 'greatest tragedies are occupied with great and permanent moral

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<sup>1</sup> See Middleton and Rowley, *The Changeling*, I.i.6-12. Upon rereading the play, there is unmistakable dramatic irony in Alsemero's Edenic lovesickness: 'I love her beauties to the holy purpose, / And that, methinks, admits comparison / With man's first creation, the place blest, / And is his right home back, if he achieve it. / The church hath first begun our interview, / And that's the place must join us into one, / So there's the beginning and perfection too.'

conflicts' (CP3, 125).<sup>1</sup> The comparison with Greek playwrights is particularly significant since Eliot claims that the 'Renaissance itself was much more Latin than Greek' (CP3, 200). 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation' (1927) characterises Roman and Greek tempers by way of explaining the different kinds of tragedy these two cultures produced. The Romans, Eliot condescendingly argues (199), were 'simpler creature[s]' than the Greeks. Their primary duty was toward the state, and thus their 'virtues were public virtues'. The Greeks also paid due respect to the state, but their civil consciousness was supplemented by 'a strong traditional morality' founded on a direct relation with the gods in which the state did not have an intermediary role. Thus, in Greek tragedy the 'dramatists moralize only because morals are woven through and through the texture of their tragic idea' (200). In contrast to those of the Greeks, Seneca's plays are informed by an ethics of 'postures': 'moral habits' are replaced by 'moral attitudes and poses', public codes and conventions.

'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' (1927) also considers Seneca's legacy of stoicism. Commenting on Othello's final speech, Eliot reads the protagonist's self-dramatization – his 'pose' as a pathetic figure maligned by circumstance – as the most 'terrible exposure of human weakness' rather than an instance of 'the greatness in defeat of a noble but erring nature':

What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is *cheering himself up*. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. I do not believe that any writer has ever

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Eliot's remarks on Webster in his essay, 'The Duchess of Malfy' (CP6, 208): 'In a world without meaning there can still be horror, but not tragedy. Webster's drama is tragic, it belongs to a world in which right and wrong, the soul and its destiny, are still the most important things.'

exposed this *bovarysme*, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare. (CP3, 248)<sup>1</sup>

Along with Othello's last words (which Eliot quotes), the passage bears comparison with 'Eeldrop and Appleplex'. Firstly, Othello's efforts to 'dramatize himself against his environment' is an effort to transfer his actions into the public realm and position himself in relation to circumstances that will render him an object of sympathy; the 'enlightened public' (CP1, 527) sees the Gopsum murder as a regrettable consequence of the 'Drink Question, or Unemployment' (this is an example of the liberal 'New Morality' More detested: social sympathy that obscures moral consequence). Secondly, Othello reminds the audience of his service to the state; Eeldrop ruefully remarks that people are important only according to their function in society (government officials are his first example). Lastly, both texts make disparaging reference to Nietzsche. In the essay, Eliot casts Nietzschean morality as a 'late variant' (CP3, 255) of Roman stoicism and thus as the antithesis of Christian humility (an idea which finds concurrence in Irving Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership*); in the short story (CP1, 527-528), Nietzsche is provocatively and perversely labelled as a 'mob-man' whose philosophy of individualism inspires the following of those with the least character.<sup>2</sup>

The continuity between Roman stoicism and Nietzsche's philosophy requires some explanation, and is perhaps best addressed in view of an objection raised to Eliot's characterisation of Othello. In a letter of October 1927, Sir Herbert Grierson defended the dignity of Othello by asserting the hero's aristocratic spirit: 'But if he is "cheering himself up" it is in preparation for executing justice upon himself. He says as it were "*You* are not the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *The Cocktail Party*, CPP, 393, 403. Lavinia remarks that Edward's outward selflessness stemmed from a desire to 'think well of yourself'. Reilly later applies the sentiment more generally: '[people] are absorbed in the endless struggle / To think well of themselves.'

<sup>2</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 22: '...I am [bent] on separating [Stoical and Christian ethics] and insisting on their final incompatibility. Stoicism in both its ancient and modern forms I regard, at least in its total trend, as false and impossible; whereas I hold that at the heart of genuine Christianity are certain truths which have already once saved Western civilization and, judiciously employed, may save it again.'

people to condemn me. I have served you well. It is I who condemn & slay myself” (L3, 737 fn. 1). Not deferring to the eminent seventeenth-century scholar, Eliot responded that such an interpretation is ‘even more immoral than mine’ (738). He does not elaborate the point, but a relativist and self-defining morality, let alone one beyond good and evil, would have been anathema to Eliot’s belief in absolute good and evil.<sup>1</sup> While his claim that ‘Nietzsche is the most conspicuous instance of cheering oneself up’ might seem careless, it rather hints at his sensitivity to Nietzsche’s intellectual sympathies. (After all, Eliot had recently spent a solitary Christmas Eve in the company of Nietzsche’s complete works).<sup>2</sup> The suggestion that Nietzsche is significantly influenced by Roman stoicism is borne out in Nussbaum’s compelling essay, ‘Pity and Mercy: Nietzsche’s Stoicism’, which makes this connection explicit. Nietzsche’s education, we are told, centred ‘intensively on Stoicism’; some of his early scholarship drew heavily on Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of the Philosophers*, a seminal work of Roman stoicism; and the writings of Seneca and Epictetus ‘are among the most heavily read and annotated in his library’.<sup>3</sup> The essay further shows Nietzsche to be in agreement with Roman stoicism in his denigration of pity as a sign of weakness and insufficiency. By contrast, the person who does not pity – the self-sufficient stoic – is extolled because he/she is not vulnerable to the vicissitudes of fate or the demands of an external reality. This position is presented by Nietzsche in Aphorism 251 of *Daybreak*: ‘There is a *cheerfulness* peculiar to the Stoic: he experiences it whenever he feels hemmed in by the formalities he himself prescribed for his conduct; he then enjoys the sensation of himself as dominator.’<sup>4</sup> Whether or not Eliot had this passage (headlined ‘Stoical’) in mind

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<sup>1</sup> The sentiment is expressed in a letter to Allen Tate (L4, 430-431): ‘One is not in a position to take a moralist point of view unless one can take a super-moralist point of view. It is the believer in dogma, not the Nietzschean, who is beyond good and evil.’

<sup>2</sup> See L4, 87.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum, ‘Pity and Mercy: Nietzsche’s Stoicism’, in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143, my emphasis.

when he used the phrase ‘cheering up’, it offers a self-determining ethics he would likely have found as ‘immoral’ as Grierson’s suggestion.

*Sweeney Agonistes*, published in two instalments in 1926 and 1927 under the title *Wanna Go Home, Baby?*, also contains a reference to ‘cheering up’. It likewise involves the murder of a woman. But where Othello ‘succeeds’ in becoming a figure of pity through his self-dramatization, the murderer-acquaintance of Sweeney is exiled in a world of silence beyond sympathy. Having ‘[done] a girl in’ (*PTSEI*, 124), the man is unable either to self-delude or self-indulge. Though Sweeney recounts buying him a drink ‘to cheer him up’, this temporary measure of comfort fails to release the man from his private truth:

He didn’t know if he was alive and the girl was dead  
He didn’t know if the girl was alive and he was dead  
He didn’t know if they both were alive or both were dead  
If he was alive then the milkman wasn’t and the rent-collector wasn’t. (125)

The Gopsum murderer similarly finds himself on an alien and isolating plane of existence. Recasting Lady Macbeth’s words, Eeldrop intimates that the man appears resigned to the indelibility of his actions: ‘The important fact is that for the man the act is eternal, and that for the brief space he has to live, he is already dead. He is already in a different world from ours. He has crossed the frontier. The important fact is that something is done which cannot be undone – a possibility which none of us realize until we face it ourselves’ (*CPI*, 527). In a letter to Paul Elmer More of 10 August, 1930, Eliot expresses the predicament in similar terms:

[I]n this life one makes, now and then, important decisions; or at least allows circumstances to decide; and some of these decisions are such as have consequences for all the rest of our mortal life. Some people find themselves consequently in circumstances such that the whole of their mortal life *must* be a torment to them. And if there is no future life then Hell is, for such people, here and now; and I can see

nothing worse in a Hell which endures to eternity and a Hell which endures until mere annihilation... (L5, 292-293)

The two murderers of Eliot's creation tacitly represent an antithetical attitude to what Eliot sees as Othello's self-determination and hubris. If Othello's attempt at 'cheering himself up' signals the desire to think well of himself, if his posture aligns with Nietzschean stoicism and pride, then the murderers in 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' and *Sweeney Agonistes* are shown to surrender themselves to a new and inescapable reality: they see things as they are. Such unflinching acceptance of weakness or culpability is the essence of Christian humility or, in a term more apposite to tragedy, shame. This is not to say Othello is without shame; in fact, it is shame that drives him to present a mitigation of his actions (Eliot's term is *bovarysme*). The experience of shame and the simultaneous need to quell it is also what leads a figure like Oedipus to self-mutilation. In the *Convivio*, Dante remarks that shame is an emotion that afflicts the soul but reflects in the eyes. This is why Oedipus blinds himself 'lest...inward shame should outwardly appear'.<sup>1</sup> But both Othello's and Oedipus' inadvertent and respective admissions of shame are still entangled in face-saving strategies. Agamben illuminates this in *The End of the Poem* when juxtaposing the blind Oedipus and the shamed Pilgrim of *Purgatory* 30 and 31.<sup>2</sup> The latter undergoes a purgation of guilt in humbly baring (and bearing) his shame completely; the former is unable to embrace the burden of guilt or shame to the extent that he is '*personally innocent*'. The difference Agamben identifies between them is 'penitential humiliation' – a penitential humiliation that prepares the ground for humility.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Convivio* (London: J. M. Dent, 1903), 180-181.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999b), 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Paul Saurette, *The Kantian Imperative*, 9-10. Saurette's analysis of humiliation in the works of Kant offers a fascinating point of comparison: '...in the crucial third chapter of the first book of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, humiliation makes a rather surprising appearance... "The moral law unavoidably humiliates every human being when he compares with it the sensible propensity of his nature. If something represented as a



In Eliot's analysis of Othello's final speech, in *Sweeney Agonistes*, and in 'Eeldrop and Appleplex' there is a tension that predicates on a choice either to translate the burden of suffering into general terms or to embrace a private truth, however awful. Understood in Kierkegaardian dichotomies, which provide a suggestive parallel, the choice is between the ethical and the religious stages of existence. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard juxtaposes Agamemnon (the tragic hero) and Abraham (the knight of faith) as respective representatives of these stages.<sup>1</sup> Though both are required to commit horrifying acts of sacrifice, they are distinguished on the basis of speech.<sup>2</sup> Agamemnon suffers personal loss in sacrificing Iphigenia but can assuage it by rendering his actions in the language of public service:

It is a fearful thing to do this deed,  
 Yet fearful not to do it: I am bound....  
 You see this host of ships and mail-clad men, –  
 They cannot reach the towers of Ilium,  
 They cannot take the far-famed steep of Troy  
 Unless I sacrifice you (Iphigenia) as he bids,  
 Calchas, the prophet. (ll. 1258-1265)<sup>3</sup>

Abraham, however, is bound in silence. As a knight of faith he must act and abide in solitude. While the ethical stage allows escape from the inner life via a legal system and other public

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*determining ground of our will* humiliates us in our self-consciousness, it awakens *respect* for itself insofar as it is positive and a determining ground.”

<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Book on Adler*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1994), 49-51, 68-69.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 59-61. Derrida writes that the ‘first effect or first destination of language involves depriving me of, or delivering me from, my singularity’. Speaking involves an unburdening in which I surrender my freedom (since now I am subject to external yet relative standards) and my responsibility in laying claim to it (since I put myself at the mercy of the law in an act of confession): ‘For common sense, just as for philosophical reasoning, the most widely shared belief is that responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret, to the possibility and even the necessity of accounting for one's words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them.’

<sup>3</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, in *The Complete Greek Drama*, Volume 2, ed. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill (New York, NY: Random House, 1938), 324.

institutions, the religious stage offers no repose.<sup>1</sup> Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Lucius Junius Brutus – tragic heroes of the ethical – justify their respective deeds in terms of duty or some other sympathetically comprehensible criterion. They, like Othello, ‘succeed in turning [themselves] into...pathetic figure[s]’. Or, rendered in the language of ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’, they become ‘generalized men’. But Abraham has no recourse to explanation and cannot expect sympathy. He typifies the Christian heroism Kierkegaard praises in *The Sickness unto Death* since he ‘venture[s] wholly to become [himself]...alone before God’.<sup>2</sup> This solitude is what constitutes both the dreadfulness and humility of his situation. And because he refrains from returning to the security of the ethical, his truth remains private, personal and singular.<sup>3</sup>

Without overstating an affinity, the correspondence between Kierkegaard’s ethical or universal and Eliot’s ‘general’ may be limited to this: any translation of the private into the public obscures authentic subjectivity from the subject itself.<sup>4</sup> Subjectivity or ‘unique being’ is not defined against societal structures; rather, it trembles – always in tension – between a moment’s surrender and the ‘awful daring’ (*PTSEI*, 70) that attends it in the scheme of eternity. This moment in *The Waste Land* dramatizes the conflict between the general and the private: the general can be expressed in obituaries or cemented in wills or pithily captured in epitaphs. But private truth – belonging to the province of the religious stage – is locked in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 67. Levinas writes that the ethical stage is ‘a stage at which the inner life is translated in terms of legal order, carried out in society, in loyalty to institutions and principles and in communication with mankind’.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Such interiority, Levinas argues, cannot be matched by exteriority: ‘The subject has a secret, for ever inexpressible, which determines his or her very subjectivity. A secret that is not simply knowledge about which one refrains from speaking, but one that, identified especially with the burn of sin, remains of itself inexpressible. No truth triumphant, i.e. rational or universal, no expression could express or assuage it.’ Levinas, *Proper Names*, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Though long after the writing of *The Waste Land*, it is likely that Eliot had acquaintance with Kierkegaard via Theodor Haecker’s *Søren Kierkegaard und die Philosophie der Innherlichkeit* (1913). See *L5*, 159. The Kierkegaardian divide between the ethical and religious stage is perhaps also evident in *The Elder Statesman* (*CPP*, 573): ‘It’s harder to confess the sin that no one believes in / Than the crime that everyone can appreciate. / For the crime is in relation to the law / And the sin is in relation to the sinner.’

silence and irretrievability: an ‘age of prudence’, of proper conduct, of self-dramatization can never retract the consequence of a moral act. This much is asserted in ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’: individuating truths cannot be recalled in words, nor do they allow access to those who are in ‘different worlds from ours’.

### **Towards the refining fire**

When Eliot was writing *The Waste Land*, he was in a different world to the one he had inhabited when he declared his inability to use the word ‘pudibund’ six years earlier. In the intervening years he had suffered the humiliation of Vivien’s betrayal, mental collapse, and a kind of spiritual isolation which, he would later admit to John Middleton Murry, had started as early as 1915 (L2, 627). Accordingly, his creative work became more preoccupied with morals than with manners, with sin over ‘bad form’. Ironically, it is in the wake of these tortuous upheavals and realisations that ‘pudibund’ found a home in an eventually discarded poem among already discarded emotions.

Pudibund, in the clinging vine  
~~Where the m. waters fall~~  
The adepts/votaries grouped in 2s + 3s  
adepts  
~~In condoutis led between~~ the trees  
Are scattered underneath  
The smooth mel. waters fall  
Where am. adepts recline (WLF, 103)

The fragmentary lines appear in Eliot’s hand on the verso of a poem called ‘Exequy’, and are ostensibly intended to substitute the third stanza on the obverse. In the first three stanzas the reader encounters a refined and civilized milieu. The speaker contemplates his ‘suburban tomb’ which is soon transformed into a ‘sacred grove’, and he sees a vision of himself carved in fine marble. The flame attending the scene is ‘cordial’; the shades of this pre-Christian

underworld do 'no good, but not much harm'. But after the stanza which introduces 'pudibund', we are met by a soul 'more violent, more profound', one who willingly commits himself to a purgative flame, one who not only asks us to remember his pain but who declares remembering his own wrongdoing. That soul, of course, is Arnaut Daniel, whose words in *Purgatory* not only gave Eliot's 1920 collection its title ('Ara Vos Prec'), but who would become emblematic of humbly submitting to the righteous, God-decreed punishments for one's sins.

## Chapter 2

### Pudenda of the psyche: embarrassment in *More Pricks than Kicks*

Midway into his narrative in *Molloy*, Moran claims to lose interest in his ‘patients’ once finished with them. There is no reason to doubt that he will never see them again, so it is all the more interesting that he remembers their names and also their stories. The imprint they have made seems indelible: ‘What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others’ (TN, 132). A name conspicuous in its absence from this Beckett pantheon in 1951 is Belacqua. Though the question is unanswerable, it is teasing to consider whether the hero of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks than Kicks* is subsumed into ‘all the others’ or whether he is completely unknown to Moran. In either case an act of repression seems likely.

Belacqua was, after all, something of an embarrassment to his creator. It is common knowledge that *Dream* was universally rejected by publishers and only saw the light of day three years after Beckett’s death. Belacqua’s reincarnation in *More Pricks than Kicks*, if more vexing to the author, was less vexed among readers: Chatto and Windus published the book on 24 May 1934. But as John Pilling shows, this was a compromise Beckett found hard to swallow, both at the time of publication and in later life.<sup>1</sup> The initial title for the collection, ‘Draff’, hinted at Beckett’s feelings about recycling and reshaping Belacqua’s *curriculum vitae*: it constituted waste, offal, the festering sore of a dream deferred. Then there was the additional humiliation of being asked to write another story in order to improve the likelihood of sales, only to have the eventual product, ‘Echo’s Bones’, unceremoniously if kindly rejected by Charles Prentice. Apart from questions of artistic pride, Beckett was sensitive,

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<sup>1</sup> John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett’s ‘More Pricks than Kicks’: In a Strait of Two Wills* (London: Continuum, 2011), 1-25.

after the fact, to the way in which the unflattering depictions of friends and family in *More Pricks* would be received. According to James Knowlson, Beckett ‘still regretted’ the cruel caricature of his cousin, Peggy Sinclair, fifty-four years after publication (*More Pricks* came out within a year of Peggy’s death).<sup>1</sup> He was also sensitive, if less acutely, to the collection’s reception in respectable circles. When polishing off his own résumé in 1937 for a lectureship application to the University of Cape Town, he removed the sting of innuendo from the title by referring to it only as ‘Short Stories’ (L1, 524).

Beckett’s feelings about *More Pricks* did not soften over time. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, written in 1958, Krapp the elder reflects on that ‘stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago’ and remembers with bitter irony his early artistic output which resembles Beckett’s own: ‘Seventeen copies sold, of which eleven at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas. Getting known’ (CDW, 222).<sup>2</sup> As is clear from the third volume of the letters, *More Pricks* was on Beckett’s mind at this time as scholars and publishers began to show their interest. These letters from the late 1950s and early 1960s also reveal his distaste for the book and his active resistance to its republication: ‘With regard to *More Pricks* I should prefer them never again to see the light of day’; ‘Wouldn’t open More Pricks for a king’s ransom’ (L3, 181, 249). Though John Calder nearly persuaded Beckett to republish, the task of revisiting work which he had always found unsatisfying proved too taxing in the end.

I have broken down half way through galleys of More Pricks than Kicks. I simply can’t bear it. It was a ghastly mistake on my part to imagine, not having looked at it for a quarter of a century, that this old shit was revivable. I’m terribly sorry, but I simply have to ask you to stop production. I return herewith advance on royalties and ask you to charge to my account whatever expenses whatever entailed by this beginning of production. I’ll be talking to John today to the same humiliating effect. Please forgive me. (L3, 633)

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<sup>1</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 183.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the book’s poor sales, see Pilling, *Samuel Beckett’s ‘More Pricks’*, 3.

Belacqua was indeed something of an embarrassment for Beckett. But the character and his misadventures were also a repository for the author's embarrassment, for his own deep and disabling sensitivity to the opinion of others. Embarrassment is a significant element in Beckett's early writing. The poetry contains several references to blushing: in 'Enueg II' the sky 'crumbl[es] shyly...blushing away into the evening'; the speaker of 'Casket of Pralinen' confesses that 'I don't blush, / but I am ashamed' of 'dud artistry' and his presumption 'to align words'; and in 'For Future Reference', an anxiety-inducing dive peters out with the speaker swimming away 'blushing and hopeless' (*CP*, 9; 33; 29). In the creative prose, the pervasiveness of embarrassment is well summed up in an aspect of Belacqua's character that is stated in *Dream* and duplicated with slight modification in *More Pricks*: '[Belacqua] stood bedraggled under the lintel, clutching his enormous glasses (a precautionary measure that he never neglected when there was the least danger of his *appearing* embarrassed, appearing in italics because he was always embarrassed)' (*MPTK*, 69).<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will argue that Beckett's propensity for blushing is integrally connected with the 'isolationism' (*L1*, 257) he sought to overcome during the mid-1930s. As his preoccupation with lessness, self-effacement and humility grows from *Murphy* onward, conventional embarrassment undergoes an inversely proportional diminishing. It is perhaps for this reason that Belacqua does not number among Moran's band of moribunds or that he does not figure in the 'series' Beckett saw stretching from *Murphy* to *Malone Dies* (*L2*, 71). This is not to say that embarrassment disappears from the *oeuvre* completely, only that it becomes divested of personal properties and incidental titters in order to adopt an existential

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<sup>1</sup> Compare *Dream*, 233. Also see 'Yellow' (*MPTK*, 164) for the reassurance provided by Belacqua's glass-clutching during a moment of awkward silence.

character that rings with the mirthless laughter of the *risus purus* (Watt, 39) and abolishes, as Adorno observes, ‘a canon for what should be laughed about’.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter comprises four sections which deal with different but related aspects of Beckettian embarrassment. The first section is largely biographical and pays close attention to the strategies and statements related to embarrassment in Beckett’s letters to Nuala Costello and in certain stories in *More Pricks*. I argue that defensiveness and pre-emptive self-revelation are characteristic of Beckett’s personal and literary handling of embarrassment. In sections two and three, I explore Belacqua’s easy recourse to both indignation and identity obfuscation when embarrassment threatens in ‘Dante and the Lobster’ and ‘Love and Lethe’. Lastly, the existential embarrassment that characterizes Beckett’s later work is briefly considered in relation to the kind of embarrassment encountered in *More Pricks* in order to trace a path from proud self-sufficiency to humble vulnerability.

### **‘Cold water to reduce blushing’: pre-empting embarrassment**

In *Rough for Theatre II*, there is a subtle warning to the critic about ‘letters to admiratrixes’: ‘No need to take everything literally’ (CDW, 246). It is of course in the same play that an admiratrix’s letter reveals that the subject is ‘morbidly sensitive to the opinion of others’ (242). Mindful of the caveat but also of the persistent theme of embarrassment in Beckett’s writing, it is helpful to dwell on the two extant letters to Nuala Costello, his love interest in 1934. The letters are important not only for the extent to which Beckett’s prickly nature emerges, but also because they mirror his literary handling of embarrassment in *More Pricks than Kicks*.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Volume 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Weber Nicholsen (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 257.



Biographically, embarrassment flares most visibly in the letters where Beckett's insecurity and distemper burn brightly together:

How can you [? be] so little equitable, when I obviously suffer from the acutest paraesthesia to all that is said and written to and of me. When I hear a small boy giggle two liberties off I redden to the rotten roots of my white hair. The slightest unkindly cut is a dagger stuck in my heart, another dagger. So please never say anything to me that you know I couldn't care to hear. (*LI*, 207-208; 10 May 1934)

With this naked declaration, Beckett situated his own sense of embarrassment both in relation to social manners and within an awareness of psychological disorder. It is worth reminding ourselves that the early to mid-1930s was a period of great mental duress for Beckett. Personally, the successive deaths of his cousin Peggy Sinclair and, most devastatingly, his father in 1933 left him deeply distraught. Professionally, he had to deal with his distaste for academia and the failure of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Physically, he was worn down by numerous ailments: cysts, corns, dental problems, his racing 'bitch of a heart' (*LI*, 69). As a way of combatting both somatic and mental problems he undertook psychotherapy under Wilfred Bion between 1934 and 1936, and it is during this period that Beckett came to grasp some of the factors underpinning his psychological and physical frailty. These insights are detailed in a significant letter to Thomas McGreevy:

For years I was unhappy, consciously & deliberately even since I left school & went into T.C.D., so that I isolated myself more & more, undertook less & less & lent myself to a crescendo of disparagement of others & myself. But in all that there was nothing that struck me as morbid. The misery & solitude & apathy & the sneers were the elements of an index of superiority & guaranteed the feeling of arrogant "otherness", which seemed as right & natural & as little morbid as the ways in which it was not so much expressed as implied & reserved & kept available for a possible utterance in the future. It was not until that way of living, or rather negation of living, developed such terrifying physical symptoms that it could no longer be pursued, that I became aware of anything morbid in myself. (*LI*, 258-259; 10 March 1935)

Not content to rest on the results of therapy alone, Beckett also steeped himself in contemporary psychology in an attempt at self-diagnosis. 'Paraesthesia' (mentioned in the above letter to Costello and noted in Beckett's 'Psychology Notes'), as he would have known from his studious reading of Ernest Jones, is the abnormal physical sensation of prickling or formication, which is often symptomatic of morbid anxiety or anxiety neurosis.<sup>1</sup> Jones lists it as one of the physical manifestations of anxiety neurosis, which, in its turn, is linked with embarrassment:

In the mental manifestations [of anxiety neurosis] the emotional element is naturally the most prominent. It consists in a curious admixture of dread, panic, terror, anguish, and apprehension. It varies greatly from, on the one extreme, a *slight abashment, awkwardness, embarrassment, or confusion* to, on the other, a degree of indescribable dread that may even rob the sufferer of consciousness. Common to all degrees is a sense of something impending, of anxious expectation of something harmful or awful.<sup>2</sup>

Abashment, awkwardness and confusion are central to the mood of Beckett's first letter to Costello. Written on 27 February, the missive (*LI*, 184-189) is dressed throughout in oblique jokes and showy learnedness. Its syntax is saltatory and unforgiving (one sentence runs to 155 words); its arch references include Dante's scheme of judgement, pre-Socratic philosophers, and the ineffectiveness of cold water as blushing inhibitor. What further characterises the letter, more than its author's desire to impress, is its defensiveness. 'It's a great handicap to me,' Beckett writes in his opening gambit, 'in all my anabases and stases that I can't express myself in a straightforward manner, and that I cannot behave in a way that has the most tenuous *propriety* of relationship to circumstance' (my emphasis). He punctuates this self-deflation with an implicit comparison between himself and Yahweh:

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Psychology Notes,' 22, MS 10971/8/22, Trinity College Dublin. Hereafter, TCD MS 10971/8/22. Paraesthesia is also experienced by the narrator of 'The End' (*CSP*, 89), while Willy's joke in *Happy Days* makes a knowing nod (*CDW*, 150).

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Jones, *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1913), 159, my emphasis.

‘One is not what one is not’. The implication of the statement is twofold: on the one hand there is tacit admission that his approach is bombastic and possibly improper; on the other hand he is too proud to attempt any adjustment of his behaviour in relation to other people – hence the sly tautology by which he aligns himself with the Almighty of Exodus 3:14 who is unyielding in the face of Israel’s questions about his motives and being.

The rest of the letter, too, follows a proleptic line. Beckett self-consciously corrects an error of usage that he made in a previous uncollected letter (‘Of course one does not change [at a station], one alights’) and then repeats the right word four times in an impishly self-flagellating manner. He also produces a mischievous ‘poemetta’ about oedipal drives and theological unknowables which is followed up with an *apologia* whose terms would be used to define Thomas McGreevy’s poetry some months later (‘it is a poem and not verse...it is a prayer and not a collect’).<sup>1</sup> The hyperbole in these examples is wryly humorous, but at the same time it appears anxiously compensatory: self-revelation and self-insulation emerge as competing impulses. An analogue to this duality is Belacqua’s clutching of his glasses: it is an erythrophobic (fear of blushing) tactic used to diminish the transparency of his embarrassment but not to diminish the embarrassment itself. Readers are privy to the meaning of this gesture and are thus aware that it is at once suppressive and declarative. In the letter there is no such shorthand, but there is also no shortage of possibly embarrassing revelations: Beckett’s acknowledgement of his own social awkwardness, his linguistic slip-up, the poem about repressed desires:

Mammon’s bottoms,  
La Goulue’s, mine, a cob’s.  
Whipt, caressed,  
My mother’s breast.

But God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. ‘Humanistic Quietism’ (*Dis*, 68).

A goat's, an ass's,  
Alien beauty,  
The Divine Comedy.

The lines reinforce Beckett's claim about being unable to behave with propriety. Embedded within a letter already littered with overt and implicit references to psychoanalytic reading, they offer little in the way of repression. The tongue-in-cheek tenor of the poem cannot be overlooked, and on the plane of playfulness we see a young writer eager to impress with his worldly wisdom: he is as *au fait* with the tears of Heraclitus and the laughter of Democritus as he is with contemporary psychology. But at a deeper, more serious level, there is something self-defeating, even self-destructive, about a letter in which the author fixates on his 'mother's breast' while addressing his would-be lover. So the poem – along with the other examples of self-exposure – has an estranging function: rather than effect intimacy or relatability, the defiant parading of psychological and social vulnerability is somehow transmuted into Olympian imperviousness.

Witness Beckett's distemper in peak form following his remark about embarrassment and paraesthesia:

Can you imagine a quarry in ebullition. I have now ceased to wish to amuse you. Forgive me. Now whereas this interesting neolithic effervescence had hitherto been so forgiving as to confine itself roughly to my centre of inertia & environs, it has lately begun to embrace me without fear or favour from sinciput to planta. It takes my mind off my corns, no small favour I assure you.... Pardon our emotion. Unseasonable with Commonwealth day so nigh. (*LI*, 208; 10 May 1934)<sup>1</sup>

The letter of Costello's which prompted this response from Beckett does not survive, but it seems safe to infer that she objected to his habit of enumerating his own health concerns. In

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that in this letter Beckett objects to a reviewer's suggestion that *More Pricks* shows the influence of T. S. Eliot or, as Beckett has it, 'Télégraphie Sans Egal' (*LI*, 208).

reply, Beckett becomes openly hostile, not only calling an end to his epistolary prancing but also hurling at Costello the same kind of unrepenting ‘Forgive me’ that Hamm would later level at Clov (*CDW*, 95, 98). Magnifying his embarrassment, he conflates the pains of his corns with what the narrator of ‘First Love’ calls the pains of ‘the mind, those of the heart or emotional conative’ (*CSP*, 33). Unlike that narrator, Beckett sees his ‘omnidolence’ not as a vain dream of self-transcendence but as a means of self-affirmation and vengeance.

Similar to the Costello letter, ‘Fingal’ presents a conflation of the protagonist’s desire for another and his desire to preserve autonomy. Winnie asks ‘sharply’ about Belacqua’s skin condition (impetigo) and then makes him even more self-conscious by commenting on his audacity to kiss her ‘with that on [his] face’ (*MPTK*, 18). Adding insult to injury, she wets a handkerchief and wipes her mouth while Belacqua ‘l[ies] humbly beside her’. In answer to her question about the cause of impetigo – and in expectation of her imminent departure – Belacqua responds in a manner calculated to cause offense: ‘Dirt...you see it on slum children.’<sup>1</sup> The wilful intensification of embarrassment corresponds with Belacqua’s physical pose during this exchange: just as the attitude of relaxed reclining is at odds with an attitude of humility, so there is something contradictory in the self-denigration implicit in the comparison with slum children. Instead of placating Winnie, Belacqua’s words are primed to drive her away, to fashion the foreseen desertion into an intended rather than an inadvertent consequence. In order to maintain a measure of agency, Belacqua is compelled to strike at himself.

The tactics of this episode and of the letter bear affinity with two strategies of affect control. The first is what Silvan Tomkins calls ‘taking a bath’, which involves wilfully magnifying one’s own mortification in order to lessen or even nullify the sense of

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<sup>1</sup> This has a biographical spring. In his letter of 8 Sept, 1934, to McGreevy, Beckett shares the following unsolicited information: ‘...one of the more endearing derivatives of impetigo on my lip, where there is quite a little colony of erectile tissue...’ (*LI*, 222).

powerlessness that normally attends it.<sup>1</sup> Such masochistic behaviour aims ‘to increase negative affect to such a point that it produces an explosive overt eruption of affect which ultimately thereby reduces itself’. Tomkins provides two examples. The first is of a painter who is disgusted with her new creation and subsequently vents her self-loathing by intentionally disfiguring the painting. (*Molloy* presents a parallel situation in which the eponymous protagonist is ‘restored to himself’ in contemplating a comparable kind of artistic violence: ‘you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery’ [*TN*, 9]). Tomkins’s second example involves a gambler overwhelmed by the loss of money and loss of agency that come with his addiction. In a last ditch effort to claim control, the gambler bets his entire fortune on an unlikely winner. Upon losing everything (a foreseen event), he experiences a sense of peace. Both the painter and the gambler ‘[resort] to such an extreme, self-defeating tactic because [they feel they] cannot reduce [their] feelings of humiliation and loss otherwise than by magnifying them so that [they are] utterly consumed and finally purified, “cleaned,” “bathed.”’

The second affect control strategy relevant to Belacqua’s (and Beckett’s) experience is paradoxical intention, which resembles magnification but pertains more obviously to interpersonal relations. Victor Frankl defined the technique in 1939, explaining it as ‘a reversal of the patient’s attitude, inasmuch as his fear is replaced by a paradoxical wish’.<sup>2</sup> Frankl recounts the case-study of a young physician who experienced great anxiety at the thought of perspiring. This anxiety was sufficient in itself to trigger excessive sweating. In order to counter this somatic expression of social anxiety, the man was advised to attempt

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<sup>1</sup> Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2008), 438-440.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1959), 147.

purposely sweating as much as possible whenever the fear of sweating arose. According to Frankl, the patient was cured within a week because he took ‘the wind...out of the sails of [his] anxiety’. However, one disadvantage that subsequent practitioners of paradoxical intention/intervention have remarked on is that the process is limited to symptomatic treatment and does not aid discovery of the cause.<sup>1</sup> Another objection arises from the underlying assumption that the reversed wish – deliberate perspiration, blushing, stuttering – is an achievement.<sup>2</sup> The ‘positive’ results of this technique (reducing social anxiety) are thus contingent upon an inversion of social dynamics. Where the man’s sweating initially constituted an involuntary response conditioned and occasioned by the presence of others, it eventually developed into an expression of will. In ‘Fingal’, Belacqua uses his own physical embarrassment to turn disappointment into a desired consequence rather than one to be passively suffered. In both cases (and also in the letter), the cognitive structure of embarrassment is essentially overturned: where it usually implies loss of face, of power, and of self-possession, paradoxical intention refashions it into a locus for the retention of these things.

This inversion finds another parallel in the Polar Bear’s assessment of Christ’s character, both in *Dream* and in ‘A Wet Night’:

‘The *Lebensbahn*...of the Galilean is the tragi-comedy of the solipsism that will not capitulate. The humiliations and *retro me*’s and quaffs or irreverence are on a par with the hey presto’s, arrogance and egoism. He is the first great self-contained playboy. The cryptic abasement before the woman taken red-handed is as great a piece of megalomaniacal impertinence as his interference in the affairs of his boy-friend Lazarus.’ (MPTK, 50-51)

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Paul A. Mersch *et al.*, ‘Somatic Symptoms in Social Phobia: A Treatment Method Based on Rational Emotive Therapy and Paradoxical Interventions’, *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychology* 23, no. 3 (1992): 200.

<sup>2</sup> W. Ray Crozier, *Blushing and the Social Emotions: The Self Unmasked* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 196.

The key word here is ‘solipsism’, which replaces ‘individualism’ in *Dream* (210) and underscores the Polar Bear’s belief that Christ – both through his resignation of will and his performance of miracles – insulates himself against the world around him. Christ, the Polar Bear implies, shows no regard for established order: as his resurrection of Lazarus is a flaunting of natural laws, so his defence of the adulteress in John 8:1-11 thwarts Judaic law. But this view is counterbalanced by the Jesuit who explains that Christ’s humility ‘is beyond masochism...[b]eyond pain and service’; it is the humility ‘of a love too great for skivvying and too real to need the tonic of urtication’. ‘Skivvying’ here denotes menial service and, by extension, something microcosmic and isolated; ‘urtication’ is a word Beckett snatched from William Cooper’s *Flagellation and the Flagellants*, which pertains to whipping with nettles and is found in a section on the curative properties of corporal punishment.<sup>1</sup> The import of the Jesuit’s claim, then, is that neither Christ’s humility nor his humiliations are in any way self-serving.

Beckett’s own epistolary abasement, however, engenders a kind of auto-immunity against the engagement with and transgression of perceived social standards.<sup>2</sup> This is achieved by dint of an internalised critical self who is unduly punitive. Embarrassment thus becomes a mode of anticipatory anxiety which disarms external censure in being openly displayed. Karin Stephen, whose name is mentioned in the letter and whose *The Wish to Fall Ill* (1933) Beckett had diligently studied, writes that the neurotic ‘behaves as if he had a bad conscience’.<sup>3</sup> Due to feelings of inadequacy, the neurotic ‘may be paralysed by his own inner self-contradiction’ because ‘he is divided against himself and because all satisfaction is

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<sup>1</sup> William Cooper, *Flagellation and The Flagellants: A History of the Rod in All Countries From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: William Reeves, 1877), 207.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida’s ‘autoimmunitary process’ appears analogous: it is ‘that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, “itself” works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its “own” immunity’. In Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Karin Stephen, *The Wish to Fall Ill: A Study of Psychoanalysis and Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 195.



unconsciously repudiated as wicked and dangerous'. Yet the dialogic nature of this manoeuvre is detrimentally insulating since the subject, in adopting the roles of both judge and condemned, eliminates the necessity to see itself through the eyes of the other.

In addition to the letter's self-protective strategies, the interminable sentence mentioned above reads as an oblique declaration of the author's desire for a special kind of experience untethered by teleological considerations and immured against external affliction. That is, in Beckett's words, 'anabasis...[free] from destination and hence from schedule':

...from this delicious conception of movement as gress, pure and mere gress, one arrives like a bird to its nest, though nest scarcely seems to be the right word in such a passage, at an elucidation of the crime immotivé that never occurred and never could to Gide or to any of his kidney, or indeed to any person within earshot of the ringing grooves save only to myself, who I assure you could not be induced to part with it for love or money or any other incitement whatever, on account of its inestimable antiphlogistic properties that exceed anything of the kind I ever tried, and I have tried everything, from cold water to reduce blushing to Guinness as anterotic. (*LI*, 186)

Recycling terms from 'Ding-Dong' (written between 1932 and 1933), Beckett effects close association between himself and the egocentric Belacqua.<sup>1</sup> In this story, the protagonist also extols the virtues of 'gress' or 'gression'; he, too, delights in movement that is '[e]xempt from destination' (*MPTK*, 33).<sup>2</sup> Then there is an assertion of 'self-sufficiency' and a simultaneous destruction of that self-sufficiency as it seeks a means to express and explain itself. The narrator of 'Ding-Dong' articulates this comparatively directly:

He lived in a Beethoven pause, [Belacqua] said, whatever he meant by that. In his anxiety to explain himself he was liable to come to grief. Nay, this anxiety in itself, or so at least it seemed to me, constituted a break-down in the self-sufficiency which he

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<sup>1</sup> For a chronology of composition for individual stories, see Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks'*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> In a 1931 letter, nodding to Eliot's 'The Hippopotamus', Beckett wrote that he was 'too tired and too poor in the guts or spunk whatever the stuff is to endow the old corpse with a *destination* & buy a ticket & pack up here. The 'pottamus waits for his angels' (*LI*, 88).

never wearied of arrogating to himself, a sorry collapse of my little internus homo, and alone sufficient to give him away as inept ape of his own shadow. (*MPTK*, 32)

In the letter, the implosion of self-sufficiency is not overtly linked with an ‘anxiety to define’, though the formally labyrinthine definition of ‘mere gress’ hints at such anxiety. Both the author and his creation are troubled over the vulnerability implicit in any *apologia pro vita sua*, particularly when it occurs in the context of emotionally intimate relationships. Beckett had in *Proust* already expressed a deep scepticism about the value of friendship, echoing the French author’s cynical belief that interpersonal communication involves a self-deluding negation of solitude. Belacqua’s concern about being exposed as ‘inept ape’ in explaining himself to his ‘sometime friend’ (*MPTK*, 31) thus has a striking correlative in Beckett’s claim that communication is ‘merely a simian vulgarity’ (*PTD*, 63).<sup>1</sup> That he perceived a threat in the intimacy of close acquaintance is also intimated in a choice plunder of John Earle’s seventeenth-century text, *Microcosmographie* (1650), from which Beckett copied the phrase ‘verenda of the soul’ and transmuted it into ‘pudenda of my psyche’ in *Murphy* (30).<sup>2</sup> The passage in Earle reads as follows:

whereas friendship...is engendered by a more inward mixture and coupling together, when we are acquainted not with their virtues only, but their faults, their passions, their fears, their shame, and are bold on both sides to make their discovery. And as it is in the love of the body, which is then at the height and full, when it hath power and admittance into the hidden and worst parts of it, so it is in friendship with the mind, when those *verenda* of the soul, and those things which we dare not shew the world, are bare and detected one to the other.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This gives some insight into Beckett’s proposed cover for *Murphy*: two apes playing chess. Given these connections to primates and incommunicability, it is unsurprising that Murphy’s only true friend is Mr. Endon whose moves on the chessboard are made without acknowledgment of Murphy’s.

<sup>2</sup> John Pilling notes that ‘verenda’ is the ‘term for the private parts in Pliny’s *Natural History*’. Pilling, “‘For Interpolation’: Beckett and English Literature”, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 16 (2006): 212. See also Beckett’s short story, ‘Echo’s Bones’, where the words ‘rosy pudency’ (*EB*, 17) occur.

<sup>3</sup> John Earle, *Micro-Cosmography, Or, A Piece of the World* (London: Salisbury, 1786), 164-165.

As a measure against the exposure that comes with personal attachments – and in protecting the pudenda of their psyche – both Beckett and Belacqua rely on the evasive manoeuvres afforded by ‘gress’. In the letter, Beckett gives shape to this notion by linking it with the *crime immotivé*, which refers to the gratuitous act (*crime immotivé*) that occurs in André Gide’s novel, *Les Caves du Vatican* (1913). In this work, the protagonist (Lafcadio) commits murder by pushing a stranger from a moving train for no reason. Ironically, ‘*crime immotivé*’ is appropriated by Beckett to the exclusion of Gide. Though he admired the French author’s work, Beckett thought that he had not gone far enough in the direction of dehiscence, claiming in one of his lectures at Trinity College Dublin that there is a ‘Coherence in Gide that...he can’t avoid’.<sup>1</sup> As John Bolin argues, Beckett read *Les Caves du Vatican* ‘as an exploration of the way that “chance” events in the novel ironically reveal their “preordained” position in an ordered structure’.<sup>2</sup> The implication of the letter is thus that where Gide had failed to free his writing and his characters from ‘destination and hence from schedule’, Beckett would succeed.

Yet in ‘Ding-Dong’, the *crime immotivé* in its various guises (‘pure blank movement’, ‘pure act’, ‘gress’) is inscribed with an inescapable sensitivity to the ‘outer world’.

Not the least charm of this pure blank movement, this ‘gress’ or ‘gression,’ was its aptness to receive, with or without the approval of the subject, in all their integrity the faint inscriptions of the outer world. Exempt from destination, it had not to shun the unforeseen nor turn aside from the agreeable odds and ends of vaudeville that are liable to crop up. This sensitiveness was not the least charm of this roaming that began by being blank, not the least charm of this pure act the alacrity with which it welcomed defilement. But very nearly the least. (*MPTK*, 33)

The bathos is one with that at the end of ‘Dante and the Lobster’: the subject’s sensitivity during ‘gress’ is as charming as the lobster’s death is quick. Though embedded within

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Bolin, *Beckett and the Modern Novel* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Bolin, *Beckett and the Modern Novel*, 49.

overwrought litotes, this inability to remain blank, to rest within the ‘last phase of...solipsism’ (31), would seem more readily acknowledged in the story than in the letter were it not for Beckett’s admission of ‘hav[ing] tried everything’ to remain untouched by the outer world. Why would one require an excitement-allying remedy (‘antiphlogistic’) if one were not already susceptible to the Victorian blush that Tennyson’s ‘Locksley Hall’ perhaps implicitly imports (Beckett lifts ‘ringing grooves’ from that poem), or to the hot flushes of sexual arousal or embarrassment?<sup>1</sup> Despite appearances, Beckett builds this playful but also irritably straining sentence on collapsing ground. Just as Belacqua’s movement fails to retain its virginal quality, so his creator’s gress is less impervious to the outer world than professed.

But Beckett is hardly unaware of the irony. Though he first encountered the *crime immotivé* in Gide, his reading of Stephen’s *The Wish to Fall Ill* and Ernest Jones’s *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* in 1934 appears to have expanded his definition of the term. In his ‘Psychology Notes’ he records under Stephen’s name the ‘conception of crime as the effect, not the cause, of a sense of guilt (crime immotivé), a specific act on which to fasten & so relieve the floating sense of dread’.<sup>2</sup> Under Jones he produces a summary of a third ‘character type’: ‘Those that turn criminal because of a guilty conscience. These commit some forbidden act because they have a floating sense of guilt & thereby obtain relief (acte gratuit & crime immotivé). Sense of guilt usually arises ultimately in Oedipus situation.’<sup>3</sup> The unmotivated crime is thus a surrogate act for repressed anxiety or guilt which can only be assuaged through external punishment. But since the source of this anxiety is unknown to the

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<sup>1</sup> The *OED* defines *antiphlogistic* as ‘counteracting or reducing inflammation’. A secondary definition – and one more germane to the tenor of the letter given the mention of anterotics and blushing – is ‘allaying excitement’. Beckett also uses the word, or a variant of it, in *More Pricks* (178) and *Dream* (53).

<sup>2</sup> Macmann’s reflection on the confused nature of guilt and punishment seems indebted to Beckett’s early reading in psychology (*TN*, 233): ‘And truth to tell the ideas of guilt and punishment were confused together in his mind, as those of cause and effect so often are in the minds of those who continue to think.’

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, ‘Psychology Notes’, TCD MS10971/7/4 and TCD MS10971/8/4. It is worth noting that in Eliot’s *The Family Reunion*, Harry admits to having misbehaved as a child ‘in order to be punished, / For punishment made us feel less guilty’ (*CPP*, 318).

subject, he transgresses in order to elicit retribution that may prove generally cathartic or ‘antiphlogistic’.

With Beckett’s ear for puns, ‘antiphlogistic’ suggestively resonates with the fuller synthesised definition of *crime immotivé* where punishment is the motive for a crime. (Beckett wrote to his cousin in 1934 that ‘many sick people become criminals solely in order to limit their fear and gain that comfort’ [LI, 205]). What is more, it becomes apparent why the flogging/antiphlogistic properties of the unmotivated crime are preferred over more symptomatic remedies for anxiety. While cold water and Guinness represent means of coping (or not coping) with the manifestation of anxiety, the ‘gression’ that embraces ‘the agreeable odds and ends of vaudeville’ (and consequently becomes *transgression*) supplies a potential curative to the cause of anxiety. Already as early as *Proust*, Beckett had pitted magisterial forms of justice against a notion of atonement informed by Schopenhauerian pessimism:

Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement, organised by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his ‘soci malorum,’ the sin of having been born. (*PTD*, 67)

Local arrangements – possibly on par with the application of cold water and Guinness – are scoffed at, while more universal retribution is extolled. At first blush, the letter to Costello would appear to espouse exactly the opposite given the auto-immunisation against external standards that is effected through self-exposure. But these very self-exposures may also be seen as unmotivated misdemeanours intended to draw rebuff from Costello. So although the twofold effects of Beckett’s declared embarrassments are discrete and even antithetical, their aim is one: to diminish the dread that attends uncertainty.

## Indignation in ‘Dante and the Lobster’

Uncertainty is not a condition Belacqua handles well in ‘Dante and the Lobster’. Irrked at the outset by Beatrice’s unsatisfying explanations of the spots on the moon in *Paradiso* 3, he reclines so as to let ‘the itch of this mean quodlibet die down’ (*MPTK*, 3). A further measure of calm is restored when he distracts himself with the day’s agenda: ‘First lunch, then the lobster, then the Italian lesson. That would do to be going on with’ (4). Of course, things hardly turn out as expected: he is annoyed that the slice of Gorgonzola bought from a local shopkeeper is not the ‘good green stenching rotten lump’ (7) he desires; his Italian lesson fails to go to plan in several ways; and he is ultimately horrified to discover that lobsters are boiled alive.

In relation to the embarrassment that attends uncertainty, the most knotted example occurs when Belacqua is faced with his limited French vocabulary. Responding ‘composedly’ to Mlle Glain’s inquiry about the contents of the bag containing the lobster, his answer is an unabashed simplification: “‘Mine” he said, “a fish.”.’ Then – in a voice which blurs narrative statement and free indirect discourse – we are told that ‘[Belacqua] did not know the French for lobster, Fish would do very well. Fish had been good enough for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. It was good enough for Mlle Glain’ (12). The passage is crucial for two reasons that I will discuss over the course of this and the following section. First, it demonstrates the relationship between embarrassment and indignation, where indignation becomes a form of resistance to the uncertainty that attends loss of control in embarrassment. Second, it shows how the avoidance of embarrassment is achieved through Belacqua’s self-obscuring identification with a higher authority.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For another embarrassing linguistic failure that flares as self-recrimination, compare ‘Yellow’ (*MPTK*, 157): “‘See you later” [the night-nurse said]. // There was no controverting this. Belacqua cast about wildly for a reply that would please her and do him justice at the same time. *Au plaisir* was of course the very thing, but the wrong language. Finally he settled on *I suppose so* and discharged it at her in a very half-hearted manner, when she was more than half out of the door. He would have been very much better advised to let it alone and say nothing. // While he was still wasting his valuable time cursing himself for a fool the door burst open...”

Indignation, Christopher Ricks writes perceptively, has a peculiar relation to embarrassment:

the one hot flush drives out the other, as fire fire, so that a common way of staving off the embarrassment one would otherwise feel is by inciting oneself to indignation. One does this when mildly wronged...and obliged to attract attention in public to get things put right; the smallish indignation gets factitiously stoked because you will not be ridden by embarrassment once you are hotly riding indignation.<sup>1</sup>

Belacqua's indignation is not voiced in the open, though it is given sufficient vent to contaminate narrative description. The words of the French teacher are delivered, we are told, 'with a blue-stocking snigger', which is promptly followed by Belacqua's bristling interior epithet: 'Base prying bitch.' The two phrases suggest the compounded source of his embarrassment: he is caught off-guard by his linguistic limitations (he is, after all, taken with his own fluency in Italian) and he is annoyed by the inquisitiveness of the woman, which prompts his vain casting for the word '*homard*' or '*langouste*'.<sup>2</sup> Reversing the slight in his mind, Belacqua 'factitiously stokes' his indignation by turning a twofold insult into a three-pronged attack: 'blue-stocking' derides Mlle Glain's intellectualism, 'prying' denounces her curiosity, and 'bitch' binds the assault together in an *ad feminam* dismissal. The resentment further swells to envelop the woman's sexuality (or lack thereof): 'The grey hairs of her maidenhead screamed at Belacqua. A devout, virginal blue-stocking, honing after a penny's worth of scandal.'

Though not immediately apparent, this description invites comparison between the detested Mlle Glain and the beloved Signorina Ottolenghi. Modelled on Beckett's private

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 56. Rabaté points out that the word for 'lobster' in *L'Innommable* is 'langouste' and not 'homard'. In her French translation of Beckett's collection, however, Edith Fournier gives 'homard'. In this translation, Belacqua fails to find the Italian for lobster: '«A moi», dit-il, «un poisson.» // Il ne savait pas comment se dit homard en italien. Poisson ferait parfaitement l'affaire. Le poisson avait suffi à Jésus-Christ, Fils de Dieu, Saveur. Il suffirait bein à mademoiselle Glain.' Samuel Beckett, *Bande et Sarabande*, trans. Edith Fournier (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1999), 35-36.

Italian tutor, Bianca Esposito, Adriana Ottolenghi is admired by Belacqua.<sup>1</sup> But bogged as he is in his chauvinism, he patronisingly thinks it impossible ‘for a woman to be more intelligent or better informed’ than her (*MPTK*, 9). His estimation is further qualified by an apparent readiness to exclude aspects of the Ottolenghi’s femaleness: ‘There subsisted as much of the Ottolenghi as might be expected to of the person of a lady of a certain age who had found being young and beautiful and pure more of a bore than anything else’ (11). This clumsy and apophatic description is given its cue by the Ottolenghi’s ‘ruined voice’. What subsists of the physical ‘person’ seems, by extension, also ruined. But this is not much of a loss in someone who is imagined never to have prized youth, beauty, and purity. The inverse of these characteristics is not so much age, decrepitude, and impurity as a rejection of antiquated criteria for womanhood. Thus the Ottolenghi is extolled for her experience and wisdom. And given that she is ‘set...on a pedestal in his mind, apart from other women’, it is improbable that boredom with purity implies defilement; rather, it is that these physical binaries are inconsequential when abstracted into the Cartesian hierarchy Belacqua constructs. But if the idealisation makes of her a mature, learned woman beyond taint, it also makes her something of a ‘virginal blue-stocking’. And though Belacqua remains unaware of the subtle continuity between his admiring portrait of the Ottolenghi and his vicious caricature of Mlle Glain, it nonetheless establishes a baseline for his embarrassment and consequent indignation.

Belacqua’s misogynistic reaction to Mlle Glain is compounded by yet another similarity with the Ottolenghi: both women touch the quick of his pride in respective challenges to his linguistic prowess. Moments before being embarrassed by his inability to find the French for lobster, he is also embarrassed in his wish to find the English for Dante’s ‘superb pun’:

He assumed an expression of profundity.

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<sup>1</sup> For the connection between Bianca Esposito and Signorina Ottolenghi, see Chris Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, eds., *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 182.



‘In that connexion [with Dante’s rare movements of compassion in Hell]’ he said ‘I recall one superb pun anyway:

“*qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta...*”

She said nothing.

‘Is it not a great phrase?’ he gushed.

She said nothing.

‘Now’ he said like a fool ‘I wonder how you could translate that?’

Still she said nothing. Then:

‘Do you think’ she murmured ‘it is absolutely necessary to translate it?’

The ‘pun’ refers to the words of reprimand spoken by Virgil after Dante expresses his pity for the damned of the Eighth Circle: ‘Here liveth piety when wholly dead / is pity. Who, then, guiltier is than he / who lets his feelings judge Divine Decrees?’<sup>1</sup> The play on pity/piety does not amuse the Signorina, and her persistent silence compels Belacqua to blabber on foolishly. Dante, in his turn, is expressly called ‘foolish’ or ‘witless’ by Virgil, since his pity indirectly undermines the divine scheme of judgement in which astrologers and magicians walk with their heads turned backward, tears streaming down their backsides (‘arsy-versy’ as Beckett has it elsewhere).<sup>2</sup> ‘Fool’ also occurs in the poem, ‘Text 3’, in conjunction with Beckett’s translation of the Dantean pun:

Lo-Ruhama Lo-Ruhama  
pity is quick with death.  
Presumptuous passionate fool come now  
and stand cold  
on the moon (*CP*, 39).

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Italian Text with a Translation in English Blank Verse and Commentary, Volume 1: Inferno*, trans. Courtney Langdon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 20.28-30; hereafter *Inf*.

<sup>2</sup> For Beckett’s other references to this punishment in *Inferno* 20, see *MC*, 4; *CSP*, 145; *CDW*, 191.

Seán Lawlor indicates that ‘Lo-Rohuma’ draws on Hosia 1:1-6, which compounds the poem’s preoccupation with pitilessness and compassion: its meaning in Hebrew may be taken either as ‘uncompassionated’ and ‘unpitied’.<sup>1</sup> Making the affinity with ‘Dante and the Lobster’ even more striking, the poem’s final lines allude to Cain who, in the story’s assimilation of Dantean cosmology, is banished to the moon where he is ‘seared with the first stigma of God’s pity, that an outcast might not die quickly’ (*MPTK*, 5).<sup>2</sup>

These correspondences between Dante and Beckett’s poem and short story have been sufficiently noted, and so too has the predominance of Beckett’s concern with pity and pitilessness.<sup>3</sup> What has received less attention, however, is the differentiating tone behind the ‘fool’ of ‘Dante and the Lobster’ and the ‘fool’ in both *Purgatory* 20 and ‘Text 3’. In the poem, the word is transferred without irony from Dante and retains something of its pathos and judgement. The Virgilian rebuke intimates the addressee’s capacity for compassion (‘passionate’) and his implicit questioning of eternal decree (‘presumptuous’); ‘fool’ comprehends both these aspects. However, in ‘Dante and the Lobster’, Belacqua’s foolishness does not stem from an open rebuff but from the need to fill an awkward, disapproving silence. It is unclear whether the phrase ‘he said like a fool’ is the narrator’s indictment alone, or whether it signals Belacqua’s self-assessment. If taken to be the narrator’s voice, it implies that the question over translating the Dante line is objectively objectionable – there would thus be convergence between the Ottolenghi’s tacit censure and the narrator’s overt ridicule. But if Belacqua’s self-conscious voice inflects the statement, the reader is alerted to the prickling of embarrassment. In the silence that follows the ‘superb

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<sup>1</sup> Seán Lawlor, ‘Making a Noise to Drown an Echo: Allusion and Quotation in the Early Poems of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1935’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, 2008), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Italian Text with a Translation in English Blank Verse and Commentary, Volume 3: Paradiso*, trans. Courtney Langdon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 2.49-51; hereafter *Par*. Also see Beckett’s reference to Cain in ‘Spring Song’, ll. 52-58 (*CP*, 46).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Lawlor, ‘Making a Noise’, 73; Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 46-47.

pun', his 'gushing' praise of Dante already appears compensatory. The subsequent utterance is a further step in that direction and only differs in eventually eliciting a response. Whatever the Ottolenghi's taciturnity may imply, her words oppose Belacqua's wish – genuine or otherwise – to pursue the translation.

It is shortly after this that Belacqua fails to translate 'lobster'. The two moments of linguistic challenge respectively represent an embarrassment of desire and an embarrassment of necessity. The first draws into question Belacqua's motives; the second draws into question his ability. Regarding motives it should be noted that, though the interrelation between pity and piety will weigh on his mind as a genuine ethical question later in the story, at this point it presents nothing more than an opportunity for Belacqua to flaunt his linguistic talent. After all, he arrives at his lesson with the intention of thwarting the curriculum by deploying a 'shining phrase [in Italian]' (*MPTK*, 9) that he invented on his way from the pub. Apart from a little rhyme about Napoleon, the only Italian phrase textually present in the story and during the lesson is the line from Dante.

On the one hand, Belacqua's use of the line is a valid and logical response to the Ottolenghi's remark about compassion in the *Divine Comedy* and may therefore be read as an example of his quick-fire wit. On the other, it flags his insecurity. As Daniela Caselli points out, the pun serves Belacqua in *Dream* as a mantric buffer when his ego is threatened:<sup>1</sup>

Many a time had Belacqua, responding to the obscure need to verbalise a wombtombing or such like, murmured a syllable or two of incantation: 'La sua bocca...', '*Qui vive la pietà...*', 'Before morning you shall be here...', 'Ange plein...', 'Mais elle, viendra...' 'Du bist so...' 'La belle, la...' (*Dream*, 148, my italics).

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<sup>1</sup> Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 61.

These fragments from Dante, Beckett's own poetry, Baudelaire, Goethe and Mallarmé are shored against potential ruin from outside.<sup>1</sup> They verbally facilitate that special kind of solipsism, 'wombtombing', wherein Belacqua is attended by the 'un-anxious spirits of quiet cerebration' and wherein the 'conflict of flight and flow and Eros' is nullified (*Dream*, 121, my emphasis). Admittedly, the Dantean pun in the short story does not occur within a situation where gender dynamics threatens identity, but it is nonetheless part of Belacqua's calculated plan to shield himself against what he regards as the work of effete men:

Manzoni was an old woman, Napoleon was another. *Napoleone di mezza calzetta, fa l'amore a Giacominetta*. Why did he think of Manzoni as an old woman? Why did he do him that injustice? Pellico was another. They were all old maids, suffragettes. He must ask his Signorina where he could have received that impression, that the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Italy was full of old hens trying to cluck like Pindar. Carducci was another. (MPTK, 9)<sup>2</sup>

The pun is the last in a series of apparent attempts to forestall the subject of the set lesson: at first he kills thirty minutes with 'this and that obiter', then he 'dissembl[es] his great pleasure' when asking the Ottolenghi about *Paradiso* 3, then comes the pun. Manzoni is successfully given the slip, which means Belacqua can remain as contentedly 'bogged' in Dante as he is at the opening of the story (3). This manoeuvre not only belies his supposed concern with the ethics of pity/piety; it also reveals his self-serving motive for translating the Dante line.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sources of these quotations, see John Pilling, *A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2004), 255-256. It should be noted that Pilling's gloss of 'La sua bocca' does not include reference to *Pur*.22.144.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett's distaste for Carducci is made clear in his university examination preparation notes on Italian Literature (TCDMS 10965): 'No-one but a verse manufacturer could express himself like that.... Carducci, with all his erudition & complicated metres, was not a poet. His work is stamped with a desperate self-conscious effort. He is an elephant jumping ponderously through a hoop.... Carducci is an excellent university professor but an excessively bad poet.' In *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Notes diverse holo: Catalogues of Beckett's Reading Notes and Other Manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin, with Supporting Essays*, ed. Matthijs Engelberts and Everett Frost, with Jane Maxwell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 59. For further disparaging mentions of Carducci, see *LI*, 32-33 and *Dis*, 68.

On the one hand, then, there is a kind of embarrassment around intellectual curiosity that is exposed as specious. This posturing includes both the conscious efforts to subvert the lesson plan and the unconscious reasons that inform them. Phil Baker writes that the ‘central issue in *Dream* is Belacqua’s difficulty in reconciling the outer world of “Weibery and corruption” [D.100, *Weib* being “woman” in German] with the demands of what psychoanalysis would call primary narcissism; Belacqua’s “wombtomb” experience’.<sup>1</sup> The argument is no less true for ‘Dante and the Lobster’: Belacqua’s dismissal of Manzoni and company as ‘old hens’ relies on the same logical fallacy employed in his mental attack on Mlle Glain.

On the other hand, another form of embarrassment emerges in Belacqua’s failure to be admitted to the literary-masculine network that he attempts to found. As other commentators have shown, the story’s opening paragraph already effects conflation between Dante the pilgrim and Belacqua through its ambiguous use of pronouns: the ‘him’ addressed by Beatrice refers as much to Dante as to Belacqua.<sup>2</sup> The ‘superb pun’ would seem to be another instance of assimilation: Belacqua uses it both to keep the ‘old hens’ of Italian literature at bay and thus declare a literary allegiance with Dante, and also to immure himself against the outside world. But the line always belongs more to Dante than to Belacqua. The text of ‘Dante and the Lobster’ suggests the pun’s resistance to appropriation in several ways in addition to the Ottolenghi’s undercutting statement: it is placed in quotation marks, it stands between two typographic breaks that occur at no other point in the story, and though the entire lesson is conducted in Italian, these are the only words that *appear* in Italian.

The import of the non-translation of Dante only becomes clear when read against the non-translation of ‘lobster’. Not only is Belacqua unable to supply ‘*homard*’, but his

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Baker, *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Caselli, *Beckett’s Dantes*, 59; also Kay Gilliland Stevenson, ‘Belacqua in the Moon: Beckett’s Revisions of “Dante and the Lobster”’, in *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy (Boston, Mass: G. K. Hall, 1986), 41.

substitution appears as a double ineptitude for *appearing* in English. Again, as with the phrase ‘like a fool’, the text keeps an insoluble ambiguity alive. In the plainest reading, the words ‘He did not know the French for lobster’ suggest that Belacqua’s ‘fish’ is actually ‘*poisson*’. But there is also the possibility that only the interchange between the two tutors is in French, since it alone is given in French. Further evidence is Mlle Glain’s ungrammatical utterance: ‘He would have *tore* it to flitters’ (it is unlikely the French teacher would make such an error in French). This means that Belacqua’s response is actually in English. And if this is true, it constitutes an act of defiance in the face of embarrassment: being surprised in his ignorance but unwilling either to admit it or deign to answer the ‘[b]ase prying bitch’ in French, Belacqua asserts himself in his mother tongue, thus dragging the situation within the realm of his control and beyond the threat of uncertainty. With great economy Beckett hints at his protagonist’s attitude: he not only speaks, but speaks up; he not only speaks up, but speaks up composedly; and his first word is not in answer to Mlle Glain’s ‘what’ but in answer to the ‘whose’ which he forcefully implies. His response hardly suggests a flustered and frantic scramble to find the right word; rather, it attests to a chauvinist attitude that will not capitulate before the inquisitiveness of a woman who does not know her place socially, intellectually, and sexually.

### **‘Hide yourself not in the Rock’: Belacqua and Christ**

Belacqua’s sense of male superiority – what Mary Bryden calls his ‘inalienable differentiation from women’ – brings me to another point: his appeal to and identification with authority figures in order to resist external censure and internal insecurity.<sup>1</sup> Embarrassment-avoidance tactics in ‘Dante and the Lobster’ and other stories in *More Pricks* depend on Belacqua’s hiding behind others. This is the case when the mingled narrative voice

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Bryden, *Women in Samuel Beckett’s Prose and Drama* (Lanham, MD: Barnes and Nobles Books, 1993), 37.

informs us that ‘Fish had been good enough for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. It was good enough for Mlle Glain’. A curious elision occurs here, since ‘fish’ is surely also good enough for Belacqua who employs the word. This vanishing act is telling for two reasons. First, it suggests Belacqua’s willed identification with Christ, whose name he perversely invokes in order to controvert the pretension read into a question that demands ‘*homard*’ for an answer. This tactic approximates Beckett’s statement to Costello that ‘one is not what one is not’, only now the defence is achieved by establishing a different criterion for unanswerability. In the letter, Beckett’s resistance to pressure upon his ego is signalled by his identification with a God who refuses to explain himself.<sup>1</sup> But in the story, Belacqua deflects the slings of fortune by arrogating to himself both the humility and sovereignty of Christ: humility in that ‘fish’ is good enough for Christ’s wonders, words, and cryptic signification; sovereignty in the claim to a name above all names. The second point about the elision is this: as with the Dantean line’s untranslatability and consequent unassimilability, the text of ‘Dante and the Lobster’ allows only a semblance of identification between Belacqua and Christ – a semblance which is contrived by the protagonist but unstitched in the story.

Across the gospels, four miracles involve fish: the first and second feeding of the multitude, and the two separate hauls of fish.<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely, however, that Belacqua has these examples in mind, since they represent instances of divine power, which, presumably, is an attribute of Christ he would want to downplay given that his own human limitations are so glaringly exposed in the scene. Moreover, his use of ‘fish’ confines its significance to a network of linguistic meaning. In this regard there is also no shortage of examples linking

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<sup>1</sup> Such identification is made explicit in ‘Yellow’ (*MPTK*, 152): ‘That was the end of all [Belacqua’s] meditations and endeavours: I am what I am. He had read the phrase somewhere and liked it and made it his own.’

<sup>2</sup> For the first feeding of the multitude, see Matt 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17 (marked in one of Beckett’s English bibles [*BDL*]), and John 6:5-15; the second feeding of the multitude is mentioned only in Matt 15:32-16:10 and Mark 8:1-19. For the first miraculous catch of fish, see Luke 5:1-11 (Beckett also marked this chapter in one of his English bibles; see *BDL*; for the second, see John 21:11. <http://www.beckettarchive.org> visited on 1 March, 2016.

Christ with the word. Addressing the first disciples, the Messiah promises to make them ‘fishers of men’ (Matt 4:19): as with Belacqua’s metonymic use of ‘fish’, the metaphoric expression used here abstracts from the physical fish with which Peter and Andrew are busying themselves. Then there is Christ’s explanation of God’s graciousness: ‘If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if *he ask* a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto children: how much more shall *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask?’<sup>1</sup>

But of more direct import for the story is Christ’s symbolic association with ‘fish’. Kay Gilliland Stevenson points out that, as signifier, ‘fish’ invokes the Greek ‘*Ichthys*’, which was an acrostic used to refer to Christ in the early days of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the *Dream* notebook Beckett recorded this cryptogram while reading his Pusey translation of St Augustine’s *Confessions*: ‘Host of holy names in one name: I X Θ T Σ, fish, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour’; further down, he writes ‘Christ the fish’ (*DN*, 29; items 201 and 205). These are not phrases taken directly from the *Confessions* but rather from Pusey’s footnotes. The explanation of the acrostic is a gloss on a passage from Book 13 which pertains both to Christ’s earthly existence and believers’ remembrance through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Directly below are Augustine’s words, followed by Pusey’s note:

[The earth] feeds upon that fish which was taken out of the deep, upon that table which *Thou has prepared in the presence* of them that believe. For therefore was He taken out of the deep, that He might feed the dry land.

He means Christ; the first letters of whose Names did in Sybiles acrostic verses make up the word ιχθυζ, a fish. He was also resembled by Jonas drawn out of the fish and deep.... He is fed upon at the Communion.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Luke 11:11-13; also Matt 7:10. For Moran’s twist on these verses in *Molloy*, see *TN*, 141.

<sup>2</sup> Stevenson, ‘Belacqua in the Moon’, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1838), 296-297.



The remainder of the note quotes from Tertulian's *De Baptismo* in explanation of the connection between Augustine's image of the fish and baptism. It is from this quotation that Beckett snatches the phrases for his notebook.

A distinction needs to be made between the allusion's significance for the design of the story and its significance for Belacqua. In 'Dante and the Lobster', the resonances of Augustine's, Pusey's and Tertullian's words are multiple: Christ as Eucharist/lobster on the communion/dinner table, Christ/Jonah and the terrible commission, Christ as the piteous example of an inimitable piety. Mary Bryden discerns that the 'Jesus who emerges from Beckett's work is often one who is also a helpless victim of God'; she reads the Christ/lobster dynamic as an instance of cruel suffering in the face of divine indifference and justifiably notes the conjunction between Christ the 'fish' and overt Christ/lobster associations later in the story.<sup>1</sup> But for Belacqua, during a moment when his tacit allegiances are revealed as the epiphenomena of self-interested 'skivvyng', neither the suffering of Christ nor the suffering of the lobster is of genuine concern. As he employs the Dante line to uphold his own agenda, and as he robs the lobster of its taxonomy in order to avoid embarrassment, so he misappropriates the 'host of holy names in one name' for his own ends, which are at once self-affirming and self-obscuring.

With markedly similar effect, the phrase 'Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour' also features in 'Serena III', a poem which pivots on the painful self-consciousness of a speaker infatuated with a woman he thinks likely to elude his grasp.<sup>2</sup> Below is the third stanza that charts the speaker's breathless movement across Dublin:

...dart away through the cavorting scapes  
bucket o'er Victoria Bridge that's the idea

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<sup>1</sup> Bryden, *Samuel Beckett and the Idea of God*, 83.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Lawrence Harvey's Dartmouth College notes suggest that Beckett's feelings for Nuala Costello inspired the poem. See *CP*, 290 and 293. The annotation to line 17 ('girls taken strippin') suggests that there is a merging of identities also between the adulteress and Costello, whose name Beckett punned on as 'nu[e] à la côte à l'eau' ('naked on the seashore').

slow down slink down the Ringsend Road  
Irishtown Sandymount puzzle find the Hell Fire  
the Merrion Flats scored with a thrillion sigmas  
*Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour* His Finger  
girls taken strippin that's the idea  
...  
the sands quicken in your hot heart  
hide yourself not in the Rock keep on the move  
keep on the move (*CP*, 20, my emphasis)

The recycled phrase from the *Dream* notebook stands at the centre of this poem's frantic conclusion. This reference to Christ is qualified by 'His Finger' and 'girls taken strippin' to make the reference to the John 8 (Christ and the adulteress) slightly more apparent, which is the same biblical narrative that the Polar Bear sees as an example of Christ's evasiveness. Here, too, the scriptural allusion serves as a motif for escape on two levels: Christ sidesteps the dilemmas of contradicting Judaic law and of condemning the woman; the speaker uses the allusion almost as a decoy ('that's the idea' is approving of the diversion created) while he 'keeps on the move' in the spirit of 'gress' so painstakingly defined in the letter to Costello. The use of Christ's name in both the poem and short story is similarly hollow. As one prone to 'blush[ing] for shame', the speaker will 'hide [himself] not in the Rock' – synecdoche for both Christ and his church – but will nonetheless use it as a screen. In 'Dante and the Lobster', Christ is 'good enough' to deflect Belacqua's shortcomings but not so good that Belacqua identifies with Christ (or Dante, or the lobster) in his suffering.

Belacqua's engagement with Christ, to state the obvious, is convenient. As the text signals the protagonist's failure to fully appropriate either Dante or the lobster, so it shows Belacqua to have the most tenuous of claims to Christ-like piety. The phrase 'good enough' implodes any pretention he might make to full understanding, since its use earlier in the story hints only at face-value acceptance of theological questions. The explanation which Belacqua

‘had...from his mother’ about Cain and the spots on the moon is resolved of its complexity by accepting the source’s authority: ‘It was a mix-up in the mind of the tiller, but that did not matter. It had been good enough for his mother, *it was good enough for him*’ (MPTK, 5, my emphasis). This passage, in turn, is connected with Beatrice’s perplexing explanation to Dante/Belacqua of the moon’s spots because of the subject matter but also because of a similar ceding before an unquestionable authority: ‘...she shewed him in the first place where he was at fault, then she put up her own explanation. *She had it from God*, therefore he could rely on its being accurate in every particular’ (3, my emphasis). The implication here, too, is that if the explanation is good enough for Beatrice, it is good enough for her audience.<sup>1</sup> Without needing to unfold the intertextual complexity of these two passages, their significance for Belacqua’s facile assimilation of Christ becomes clear: as Beatrice accepts the word of God and as Belacqua accepts the word of his mother, so Mlle Glain should accept the word of Belacqua. But the symmetry is not that neat. Whereas in the first two cases there is willing and humble acceptance, the third enforces such an attitude, albeit in Belacqua’s mind. Knowing ‘fish’ to be both a lie and an acknowledgement of his limitations, Belacqua is compelled to invoke a name which stands beyond question. Embarrassed and indignant, he must hide himself in order to assert himself.

### **Embarrassment and the other**

‘Love and Lethe’ is another story in *More Pricks than Kicks* which also contrives a facile identification between Belacqua and Christ. As in ‘Dante and the Lobster’ (and ‘Serena III’), an allusion to John 8 functions as a trap-door when the protagonist experiences a loss of control. What prompts the identity conflation (which I will turn to shortly) is Belacqua’s realisation that Ruby is not going to honour their suicide pact. This elicits a misogynistic

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<sup>1</sup> Belacqua’s trouble over the moon’s spots has a biographical spring (L3, 126): ‘I’ve been...reading *Il Paradiso* and trying again to understand Beatrice’s explanation of the spots on the moon where the spirits appear to Dante as shadowy as “a pearl on a white forehead”.’

reaction comparable to that in ‘Dante and the Lobster’, though here vexation manifests first as a bodily affront and then as cognitive upheaval: ‘That indescribable sensation, compound of exasperation and relief, relaxing, the better to grieve, the coenaesthesia of the consultant when he finds the surgeon out, now burst inside Belacqua. He felt suddenly hot within. The bitch was backing out’ (*MPTK*, 91).

The passage is remarkable for the way in which it traces Belacqua’s somatic realisation of the fact – hardly obvious to one as self-involved as he – that Ruby is an autonomous agent. Because of his extreme narcissism, Belacqua seems incapable of conceiving of his companion as (something) other than a means to his end. Callously and calculatedly, he ‘cultivate[s]’ and ‘prime[s]’ her for the part she was to play on his behalf (82). His courtship is conducted with such complacency and at such distance that he is hardly aware of her appearance, and this blinding self-interest even impinges on narrative description: ‘Further than this hint we need not allow her outside to detain us, seeing that Belacqua was scarcely ever aware of it’ (81). Indeed, that we learn anything about Ruby – her age, her sexual frigidity, her resemblance to the ‘Magdalene in the Perugino Pietà in the National Gallery of Dublin’ – is only due to a narrative ‘lull’ during which Belacqua’s arrival is awaited (80). It is only when he undergoes a ‘coenaesthetic’ experience that he begins to register Ruby’s otherness.

Beckett encountered this term in the English translation of Max Nordau’s controversial work of social criticism, *Degeneration* (1892), from which he copied an abbreviated definition into his *Dream* notebook: ‘general sensibility.... Dimly perceived cellular organic Ego not involving cerebral consciousness’ (*DN*, 96, item 664).<sup>1</sup> The concept appears in a chapter tellingly entitled ‘Ego-Mania’ where Nordau reflects on the inability of the ‘emotionally degenerate subject’ to engage with the outside world. Through

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<sup>1</sup> See also *DN*, 96, item 666, for Beckett’s entry on ‘prenatal coenaesthesia’.

coenaesthesia, however, the subject is confronted with a somatic experience whose aetiology attests to an outside presence:

Coenaesthesia, the organic dimly-conscious 'I', rises into the clear conscience of the 'Ego,' by excitations of the second order, reaching the brain from the nerves and muscles.... The cause of nervous perceptions – that is, the information reported by the nervous system concerning the excitations which it experiences – [consciousness] does not find in itself. But the [nervous perceptions] must have a cause. Where is it? As it is not in consciousness, it must necessarily exist somewhere else; there must then be something else outside consciousness, and so consciousness comes, through the habit of causal thought, to assume the existence of something outside itself, of a 'not-I', or an external world, and to project into it the cause of the excitations which it perceives in the nervous system.<sup>1</sup>

Beckett's image in 'Love and Lethe' of an anaesthetised patient waking to the surgeon at work intimates the process by which Belacqua gradually perceives a loss of control.<sup>2</sup> At first, there is 'undirected feeling...below the limen of consciousness', as Chris Ackerley puts it.<sup>3</sup> The groggy patient cannot initially filter his surroundings through sensory differentiation (hence 'indescribable sensation') but nonetheless experiences it through the sum of his bodily feelings. This is followed by the sensation of heat from within. Lastly, a leap from the *embodied* experience of otherness is made to a *cognitive* awareness of otherness. In terms of the altruistic ethics outlined by Nordau, this is a step in the right direction:

As the formation of an 'I'...is the highest achievement of living matter, so the highest degree of development of the 'I' consists in embodying in itself the 'not-I,' in comprehending the world, in conquering egoism, and in establishing close relations with other beings, things and phenomena.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. Max Simon (London: Heinemann, 1913), 249.

<sup>2</sup> The context suggests that Beckett's 'consultant' is meant in the first sense given by the *OED*. That is, one who consults another, rather than a consulting physician.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Ackerley, 'Samuel Beckett and Max Nordau: Degeneration, Sausage Poisoning, the Bloodied Rafflesia, Coenaesthesia, and the Not-I', in *Beckett after Beckett*, ed. S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 171-172.

<sup>4</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 252.

Though Beckett's later work is often preoccupied with such a relational ethics (*Not I* being nominally the most obvious example), the protagonist of *More Pricks* is more concerned with conquering the 'not-I' than with conquering his own egoism. Not only is the name-calling here verbally proximate to that in 'Dante and the Lobster', but so too is the structural experience of embarrassment-come-indignation that underpins it. The image of the patient under the knife relates to more than just dim organic consciousness: it speaks to the powerlessness of being acted upon.<sup>1</sup> Belacqua's suffering thus goes beyond what Martha Nussbaum calls 'primitive shame' and extends to feelings of emasculation: in addition to the infuriating knowledge of his thwarted designs (that is, in Nussbaum's terms, that he is not the 'centre of the world' and thus susceptible to frustration), Ruby's 'backing out' registers as a visceral trespass.<sup>2</sup> The surgeon/patient image adumbrates the invasive, even threatening, role she inadvertently assumes while simultaneously limning Belacqua's passive, female position in the dynamic – a role which is affirmed in 'Yellow' when his bandaged neck is described as a 'bride's adorned' (*MPTK*, 160).<sup>3</sup>

Belacqua's alignment with Christ occurs at the moment when the success of his plans is exposed as contingent on external factors. Following Ruby's perceived defiance and the bathetic misfiring of the gun, he adopts a sagely aloof pose by offering the phrase 'The finger of God', after which the narrative voice blurs the identities of Christ and Belacqua in its ambiguous use of pronouns:

Who shall judge of his conduct at this crux? Is it to be condemned as wholly despicable? Is it not possible that he was gallantly trying to spare the young woman embarrassment? Was it tact or concupiscence or the white feather or what? We state the facts. We do not presume to determine their significance. (91)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *The Cocktail Party*. The Unidentified Guest similarly dwells on the vulnerability and loss of ego that attends an operation (*CPP*, 362-363): '...stretched on the table, / You are a piece of furniture in a repair shop / For those who surround you, the masked actors; / All there is of you is your body / And the "you" is withdrawn.'

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 183.

<sup>3</sup> Bryden also sees the injection administered by Nurse Miranda in 'Yellow' as a phallic-role reversal (*MPTK*, 161). See Bryden, *Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama*, 45.

The narrative voice, though not as inflected by Belacqua's consciousness as in 'Dante and the Lobster', nonetheless falls under his influence (as the curtailed description of Ruby indicates). And given Belacqua's self-identification with Christ in many of the short stories, it is not much of a leap to read this passage as another such instance.<sup>1</sup> What reinforces the subtextual presence of John 8 (in addition to the allusion to Christ's finger in 'Serena III') is the lexicon of judgement. Moreover, the interrogatives, while avowing a kind of humble ignorance, are in keeping with the biblical narrative's focus on persecution.<sup>2</sup>

Even here the story seems to take its cue from Nordau's chapter: while Belacqua's initial obliviousness to an external reality is characteristic of the behaviour identified in the ego-maniac, his subsequent response is typical of the megalomaniac:

In megalomania...the patient is constantly engrossed with the external world and with men; in ego-mania, on the contrary, he almost completely withdraws himself from them. In the systematically elaborated delirium of the megalomaniac and persecution-maniac, the 'not-I' plays the most prominent part. The patient accounts for the importance his 'Ego' obtains in his own eyes by the invention of a grand social position universally recognised, or by the inexorable hostility of powerful persons, or groups of persons. He is Pope, or Emperor, and his persecutors are the chief men in the State, or great social powers, the police, the clergy, etc.<sup>3</sup>

The passage from 'Love and Lethe' thus presents an instance of 'megalomaniacal impertinence' in which Belacqua's embarrassed expectations are fallaciously manipulated in order to preserve the appearance that his will has been done: 'It will quite possibly be [Belacqua's] boast...that at least on this occasion...he achieved what he set out to do' (MPTK, 91). In light of such a rewriting, the 'Digitus Dei' is not a *deus ex machina* by which

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from the example discussed in 'Dante and the Lobster', see also Belacqua's wilful association with Christ the 'bridegroom' in 'Yellow' (MPTK, 164) and the parallels he sees between his own sufferings and that of Christ in Gethsemane in 'Walking Out' (MPTK, 95-96).

<sup>2</sup> The earlier mention of Peter Malchus already suggests that the Gospel of John is significant in the story, since it is the only Gospel to name the High Priest by name. See Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks'*, 178.

<sup>3</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 257-258.

the couple's lives are spared, but a *deus 'internus homo'* (MPTK, 32) by whose design there are no unforeseen events and thus no room for embarrassment.<sup>1</sup> Christ who cryptically writes in the dust and Belacqua who enigmatically refers to Christ's writing in the dust are entangled in their inscrutability and omniscience.

But the same opacity which invests Belacqua with a Christ-like pleroma also undercuts the roles played by the 'young wom[en]'. 'Embarrassment' stands in trivialising apposition both to Ruby's defiance of Belacqua and to the adulteress's shame in being hauled before Christ. That the former's autonomy would be seen as a kind of affront to notions of female decency is already hinted at in her probing into Belacqua's motives for the suicide: 'The normal woman of sense asks "what?" in preference to "why?"...but poor Ruby had always been deficient in that exquisite quality' (MPTK, 83). In the Gospel's account, the Pharisees bring the woman to Christ in order to bait him: 'This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him' (John 8:6). Correspondingly, this passage in the story centres on questions of *his* rather than *her* conduct. As with Mlle Glain, Belacqua – in cahoots with a narrator clearly under his thumb – mentally wrests back control from an overpowering female presence through his identification with Christ.

The common ground between Belacqua's multiple instances of manipulation and posturing considered in the last two sections – the Dante line, the taxonomic injustice done to the lobster, the self-serving association with Christ – is Belacqua's resistance to situations that are beyond his control. Because of his narcissism he desires the integral preservation of the familiar. Ultimately, his strategies to maintain the *status quo* are the kind of behaviour Beckett denounces in *Proust* but which are in keeping with his own fear of unknown consequences: 'our current habit of living is as incapable of dealing with the mystery of a strange sky or a strange room, with any circumstance unforeseen in her curriculum' (PTD,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. DN, 83, item 578.



21). Mlle Glain and Ruby – perhaps even Nuala Costello – represent this unforeseen circumstance. Their intrusion, their femaleness, their otherness are threats to be parried so that the old ego may stay intact. But as with Beckett's need for 'blushing inhibitors and anterotics', Belacqua's need for the defences of indignation and identity conflation intimates that the system is not as sufficiently sealed-off as he might wish.

### **Disarming the pot-hooks of civility: beyond embarrassment, towards humility**

Reflecting on Nagg's joke in *Endgame*, Theodor Adorno writes that

the embarrassment that comes over us when someone laughs about his own words becomes existential; life is still a quintessence only as the quintessence of everything one has to be ashamed of.... But what shame protests against has its social value: in the moments when the bourgeois act like true bourgeois, they sully the notion of humanity that is the basis for their own pretentions.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno does not develop a distinction between embarrassment and shame in this essay but rather uses the terms synonymously in order to designate the state of subjectivity occupied by Beckettian characters who glimpse their place in a world worse-made than a common pair of trousers. Such a glimpse, though frightening and disenfranchising in its import, nonetheless signals the usefulness of embarrassment in revealing a humbled existence.

It is a similar realisation of this 'quintessence' that prompts Winnie's and Willie's laughter in *Happy Days* when 'formication' is mentioned in conjunction with the sighting of an emmet: 'I suppose,' Winnie remarks, 'some people might think us a trifle irreverent, but I doubt it.... How can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?' (CDW, 150). According to *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, the joke has at least four components: 'visual (magnifying glass), linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 256.

(fornication), ontological (reproduction as a cosmic joke), and religious (the Magnificat...)'.<sup>1</sup>

But there is yet a fifth that harks back to Beckett's reading in psychology about the links between anxiety neurosis and paraesthesia, between dread and embarrassment. As the levity comes to an end, Winnie is left wondering if she and Willie had laughed for the same reasons; she attempts to assuage her sense of isolation by quoting broken lines from Thomas Gray's 'On a Distant Prospect of Eton College': 'laughing wild...something something laughing wild amid severest woe' (CDW, 150).

By this point in Beckett's career the comingling of embarrassment and tragedy was becoming a recognizable trope. Estragon's wardrobe malfunction is a case in point which represented for its author a crucial marriage of the laughable and the unhappy. On hearing that Estragon's trousers had not fallen down completely during one of the earliest performances of *En Attendant Godot* in 1953, a distressed Beckett complained to the director, Roger Blin:

There is one thing that bothers me: Estragon's trousers. Naturally I asked Suzanne if they fall down properly. She tells me that he holds on to them half-way down. This he must not do – it's utterly inappropriate. It wouldn't occur to him at that moment – he doesn't realise they have fallen down. As for any laughs that might greet their falling right down, to the great detriment of that touching final tableau, there's absolutely no objection to them. They'd be of the same order as the earlier ones. The spirit of the play, in so far as it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic, and that must be put across right to the end, and particularly at the end. I have lots of other reasons for wanting this business not to be underplayed... (L2, 350; 9 January 1953)

The inappropriate becomes appropriate, even necessary, as the despair of Vladimir and Estragon reaches its highest pitch: Gogo's trousers drop down, after all, because he removes

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<sup>1</sup> Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Faber Companion*, 204. Beckett himself shed light on the joke in a letter of 20 March 1983 (L4, 607): 'Formication: "sensation of ants creeping over the skin." (OED). Cf. French fourni – fourmillement. Winnie doesn't know the word, confuses with fornication. Willie amused, Winnie appalled, at thought of ants crawling over her.'

his rope-belt in order to assess its viability as a suicide weapon. The actor's (Pierre Latour) intervention was thus not only 'inappropriate' because the character fails to register what has happened, but also because such a self-protective strategy 'would not occur to him' at a moment when his very selfhood hangs in the balance. This much is suggested by Estragon's eventual and equanimous realisation that his trousers are around his ankles: his response is merely to acknowledge the fact of embarrassment ('True' [CDW, 88]) and then pull up his trousers in order to go on rather than to save face.

Ironically, the poetics of middle-to-late Beckettian embarrassment is circumscribed by its own decorum: it is improper to will where you have no power.<sup>1</sup> Though the question will be more fully addressed in Chapter 4, it is worth noting here that the Geulincxian imperative is incompatible with any statement of value or power even when expressed negatively as shame or embarrassment. As Max Scheler argued, shame (and embarrassment) is structurally similar to pride since it is also a 'feeling of self-value'; and while its aspect of unworthiness may resemble humility, it does not fully partake of the self-effacement implicit in true humility:

Shame, in contrast to humility, completely lacks awareness of unworthiness of one's self and a free subordination under the higher value felt in the love of another person.... With respect to humility we are directed in love to the higher value of *another* and become lost in the other's value.<sup>2</sup>

Without overstating an affinity, the existential embarrassment that Adorno finds in Beckett approximates Scheler's notion of humility in its opposition to acts of potentiation and affirmations of inherent worth. Put differently, embarrassment or shame (in Adorno's sense and not Scheler's) presents a means of exposing 'the moments when the bourgeois act like true bourgeois'. In Eliot this is the deflation of *bovarysme*, which can only be achieved in

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<sup>1</sup> Geulincx, *Ethics*, 316.

<sup>2</sup> Scheler, *Person and Self-Value*, 19.

realising one's position in relation to a moral absolute. In Beckett the dismantling of pride cannot be achieved by an appeal to the transcendental; rather, the process depends on a continual exhibition of weakness, of which existential embarrassment serves both as symptom and instrument.

Generally, this is not the kind of embarrassment found in *More Pricks*. Belacqua's many moments of discomfiture are more properly classed as 'feelings of self-value'. It is this self-value that he attempts to protect in the face of external threats by resorting to indignation and delusions of grandeur. But the text does contain a personification of what would in later years develop into Beckettian existential embarrassment: the vagabond of 'Walking Out' (*MPTK*, 97-98). Suffering the violation of Belacqua's Kerry Blue bitch, the man responds without indignation to the indignity of being urinated on: 'he might have been calling a score, his voice was so devoid of rancour'. That this fact would strike Belacqua is apt given his sharpened sensitivity to any invasion of privacy – the 'ultimate prerogative of the Christian man'. It is surprising, however, that he would recognize in the man an 'instinctive nobility', since such a realisation predicates on the avowal of a personal shortcoming. Belacqua is 'embarrassed in the last degree', not only because of what his dog has done, but also because the vagabond's humble acceptance of affront puts to shame Belacqua's quickness to anger. The moment of introspection is even more astounding for his recognition that any eventual humility he might wish to attain will be the consequence of applied divestment: unlike the vagabond, he will have to 'acquire' such an attitude. This does not happen, though Belacqua cons himself into a kind of bedside conversion in 'Yellow' when he 'sacrifice[s] his sense of what was personal and proper to himself to the desirability of making a certain impression on other people' (*MPTK*, 155). Nonetheless, the vagabond episode presents an uncanny encounter between the literary transmutation of Beckett's 'misery & solitude & apathy & the sneers' (*LI*, 258) – which he recognized as the 'the elements of an index of superiority' – and

the kind of humility that takes embarrassment as an unassuageable existential condition. Belacqua may not figure among Moran's band of moribunds, but he inaugurates the vision of an outlook 'disarmed [of] all the pot-hooks and hangers of civility'.

## Chapter 3

### Grace, sacrifice, and humility in Eliot's sermons and sermonising

Still quietly basking in the success of *Murder in the Cathedral* three months after its premiere at the Canterbury Festival on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1935, Eliot received a letter that was likely to dampen his spirits. Henry, his ever-supportive sibling whose tone in correspondence was seldom other than affectionate and urbane, had now written a protracted missive of fraternal rebuke. It complains of Tom's eager assumption of a disingenuous Bloomsbury persona, his tendency to abstract when evidence is wanted, the faux-modest shtick of professing ignorance but actually denigrating an opponent's intelligence, and a schoolmasterly intonation that occasionally inflects his prose:

Sometimes you remind me of a gentleman in full evening dress and white gloves attempting to put something right with the kitchen plumbing without soiling his attire. You are hampered by the fact that, whatever you may want to say, your public expects it to be a worthy permanent addition to the world's literature.... I fear it is largely this, and a certain manner of speaking, which has drawn the fire of so many antagonists. (L7, 749)

At the heart of the letter are graver criticisms whose boundaries are not always distinct. One concern is the incompatibility between Eliot's deep-rooted scepticism and his turn towards the Church of England. Another is the motivation behind certain polemical pronouncements and allegedly opportunistic allegiances. And the harshest imputation pertains to dramatic posturing and a consequential danger of literary, political, and spiritual presumptuousness. If these criticisms seem prompted by the doubts of Thomas Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*, which Henry had recently read, they nonetheless comprehend a time before the play's

inception, asking whether Eliot's practice of chastity, austerity, and humility amount to right deeds done for the wrong reason.

To many onlookers, Eliot's religious seriousness after 1927 marked a rupture in his career and life. Those outside (and probably a few within) the fold of Anglo-Catholicism found it difficult to comprehend his need for 'ascetic' and 'violent' spiritual discipline (*L4*, 129). Geoffrey Faber thought his colleague was 'putting [himself] in some danger by the rigidity of [his] way of life' (*L3*, 710). Ezra Pound, with crosshairs locked more on the Pope of Russell Square than on Old Possum, sniped that Eliot had begun 'disguising himself as a corpse'.<sup>1</sup> And Stephen Spender objected to the stringent askesis that Eliot espoused: '[it] convey[s] to me (and hundreds of other people like me, I think) the feeling of staying in an old school-room chapel unheated by a metal stove and doing nothing but be as consciously miserable as possible' (*L6*, 159).<sup>2</sup>

It was not only the extreme observances of faith – a vow of celibacy while married, regular fasting, partaking in the sacrament of penance – that provoked doubts.<sup>3</sup> Not failing to take him at his all-too quotable word in the preface of *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), reviewers noted that Eliot's literary criticism had become inseparably entwined with moral criticism. He was lambasted as an 'intolerant cleric', patronised for an apparent rejection of 'Modernism for medievalism', and disparaged on the grounds that his criticism was 'becoming increasingly impossible to read...without misgivings'.<sup>4</sup> The aura of incredulity did not abate with time. One reviewer of *After Strange Gods* (1934) could admire its author but could not 'follow him'; another belittled the lectures as sermonising of an 'Auntie Eliot knows best' variety; yet another detected a diabolical element in this *Primer of Modern*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 322.

<sup>2</sup> Spender was responding to Eliot's remarks in a BBC broadcast entitled 'Christianity and Communism'. See *CP4*, 428.

<sup>3</sup> For Eliot's use of the sacrament of penance, see Barry Spurr, 'Anglo-Catholic in Religion': *T. S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2010), 136.

<sup>4</sup> In Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 149, 152, 163.

*Heresy*: ‘there is something profoundly wrong with Mr. Eliot’s view of morality.... Do we not have here an example of that *unregenerate* self-deception which, as everyone knows, is one of the ways in which Mr. Eliot’s favorite antagonist, the devil, works in the modern world?’<sup>1</sup>

One of the most incisive assessments of the dichotomy that confronted contemporaneous readers – and that also confronts the primary concerns of this thesis – is presented by Stephen Spender’s 1933 review of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: ‘I think that Eliot is a writer of genuine humility, and often a writer of great frankness.... Therefore it seems the more surprisingly inconsistent that he often gives the impression of being snobbish and superior.’<sup>2</sup> The statement, itself offered in frank humility, tacitly admits that an allegation of pride rests on the appearance of incompatible attitudes in Eliot’s writing. It is criticism of a similar order to Rebecca West’s and Henry Eliot’s. The former acknowledged Eliot’s creative genius but rejected the polemics as a ‘flustered search for coherence’ concealed by a peremptory style, while the latter pinned his brother as a martyr without motive.<sup>3</sup> As one sympathetic to Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic turn, Paul Elmer More also perceived a fault line between the imaginative and critical writing, lamenting the post-conversion poetry’s persistent *Waste Land*-like preoccupation with chaos and despair in spite of the direction announced in *For Lancelot Andrewes*: ‘it is not the revolution in Mr. Eliot’s views of life...that troubles his true admirers, but the fact that his change on one side is complicated and disrupted by lack of change on the other.’<sup>4</sup>

Given the struggle of many readers to reconcile apparently contradictory aspects of Eliot’s writing between 1927 and 1935, the sermon in *Murder in the Cathedral* presents a nexus of tension. On the one hand, it constitutes a crucial dramatic component of a play that

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<sup>1</sup> In Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 275, 281, 284.

<sup>2</sup> In Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 240.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca West, *Ending in Earnest* (New York, NY, Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 283.

<sup>4</sup> In Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 214-217.



was almost universally lauded and, on the other hand, a subtle retracing of a number of Eliot's religious injunctions that alienated many readers. The language of the sermon is interspersed with certain theological assimilations that recur in essays and lectures since the time of his confirmation. Lancelot Andrewes's imprint is felt in the exposition of the main scripture reading, and F. H. Bradley's diffident scepticism resonates in a particular phrase ('a disappointment and a cheat') that spectres Eliot's writing elsewhere and brings with it a freight of anti-humanist sentiment. The sermon also rehearses some of the dogmatic pronouncements that Eliot made in public addresses of the early 1930s and, as such, appears partly informed by the moral superiority and intolerance that so many critics deprecated: it is shadowed by an avowal of the correctness of Catholic faith, the conviction that human benevolence is futile without divine grace, and an inflexible insistence that love for one's neighbour is validated only by a primary love for God.

In this chapter I consider Eliot's insistent reiteration of certain theological beliefs which collectively give shape to his understanding of Christian humility, both in the sermon of *Murder in the Cathedral* and in the essays that resonate with its doctrinal point of view. As the creative culmination of what might harshly be called Eliot's public sermonising, the play's sermon serves primarily as structuring device for my analysis, which ranges across prose works that evince his philosophical scepticism (both early and late) and the correlation of such scepticism with deeply held theological beliefs. The caveat, plainly stated, is that more attention is given to the thought which shapes the sermon than to the sermon or indeed *Murder in the Cathedral* itself.

In the first section I focus on Lancelot Andrewes's reading of Luke 2:14, Eliot's use of the Douay-Rheims English bible, and Augustine's doctrine of grace. Sections two and three are related, extending inquiry into Eliot's personal misgivings about human goodwill and his belief in the doctrine of grace; Eliot's early philosophical scepticism is here cast in

relief with his later religious conviction. The final section explores two further parts of Gospel scripture: John 14:27 (which features both in the sermon and in two other essays written shortly before *Murder*) and Matthew 22:37-40 (the Summary of the Law), which Eliot also invokes in his critical prose and which he closely associates with the sacrificial implications of the former verse. Here I tease out Eliot's profound belief in proportional adherence to the Summary of the Law and his rejection of humanitarianism that is separated from the love of God, suggesting that the dogmatism which disenchanted many readers is an integral element in Eliot's Christian humility.

### **Humility and goodwill: Andrewes, Augustine, and the Douay-Rheims Bible**

Among the sermonisers of the Anglican Church who number among Eliot's critical subjects – John Bramhall, John Donne, William Laud, Richard Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, and others – Lancelot Andrewes receives the most attention and praise. 'Gerontion' shows the Bishop's influence on Eliot to reach back to 1919 – the same year in which he grumpily remarked that 'no one reads Andrewes' (*CP2*, 13). A more intimate interest is suggested by his 'pilgrimage' to Andrewes's tomb in 1930 (*L5*, 318-319) and his love for the Bishop's posthumously published book of prayers and devotions, *Preces Privatae*. (Eliot would read this book when unable to fall asleep and had also gifted a copy to his mother [*L3*, 736; *L5*, 318-319].) By 1926, approaching his confirmation within the Church of England, Eliot began to conceive the importance of Andrewes for his general outlook on literature, politics, and religion. Having accepted a commission for a *TLS* leader that would appear days after the third centenary of the preacher's death, Eliot gave an indication of its personal significance: 'the article will be a pretty serious matter for me as I shall have to clear up my mind and try to come to conclusions, in connection with Bishop Andrewes, *affecting my whole position*' (*L3*, 209, my emphasis).

One of the conclusions to which Eliot came in the article was Andrewes's equipoise between the 'old authority' of Catholic Europe and the 'new culture' of Protestant England. For Eliot, the Reformation was one of the great tragedies of history because it constituted the 'intellectual break up of Europe' (*L3*, 131). At the same time he saw post-Reformation Catholicism in England as schismatic due to its wilful divorce from the history and tradition of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Andrewes, however, was a man who represented the middle-way between two extremes, a man who possessed the roundedness of a consummate Anglo-Catholic:

we find also that breadth of culture, an ease with humanism and Renaissance learning, which helped to put them on terms of equality with their continental antagonists and to elevate their Church above the position of a local heretical sect. They were fathers of a national Church and they were Europeans.... [T]he voice of Andrewes is the voice of a man who has a formed visible Church behind him, who speaks with the old authority and the new culture. It is the difference of negative and positive: Andrewes is the first great preacher of the English Catholic Church. (*CP2*, 819)

This particular *via media* is pertinent to the sermon of *Murder in the Cathedral*. As Barry Spurr has shown, Eliot saturated his Catholic protagonist's words with Anglican liturgy, thus achieving an anachronistic consolidation of Rome and England.<sup>2</sup> But the consolidation is even more tellingly achieved by the intertextual presence of Andrewes, whose influence on the sermon goes beyond the mere question of style and order.

As an unabashed champion of *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity*, Eliot could hardly have failed to remember that two of Andrewes's Christmas sermons minutely unpicked the same Gospel verse as that featured in Thomas Becket's sermon: Luke 2:14. The first – Sermon XII, preached before James I at Whitehall on Christmas day 1618 – had an abiding

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Political Theorists', *CP3*, 137. Eliot rejects as historically ignorant Anthony M. Ludovici's suggestion that Toryism has more in common with the Church of Rome than with the Church of England. In 'Thoughts After Lambeth' (*CP4*, 237), he writes more forcefully still that 'the Roman Church in England is a sect'.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Spurr, 'Liturgical Anachronism in *Murder in the Cathedral*', *Yeats-Eliot Review* 15 (1998): 3-7. See also Spurr, 'Anglo-Catholic in Religion', 237.

impact on Eliot. It is one of the sermons alluded to in ‘Gerontion’, and a number of its phrases are strategically highlighted for Eliot’s own readership in ‘Lancelot Andrewes’. But its two central messages – of Christian humility and of the necessity to recognize the consanguinity of Christ’s birth and death – are of particular import for *Murder in the Cathedral*. While the second of these messages has direct correlation in the sermon, the first has implicit significance for Thomas Becket’s flirtation with spiritual pride and for the play’s larger preoccupation with martyrdom.

Taking Luke 2:12–14 as his focus, Andrewes examines the nature of the *sign* of Christ’s birth in excruciating detail. He sees the circumstances surrounding the Incarnation not only as the accidents of humility but also as its index. The distinction between ‘*signum humile, signum humilis*’ (humble sign, sign of humility) posits both the nature of the event and the nature which the event seeks to inculcate.<sup>1</sup> It indicates an external, objective reality, while inviting a subjective discovery of that reality. The sign, Andrewes stresses repeatedly, is not merely the Christ-child in his modest surroundings; it is *finding* the child in his modest surroundings: ‘For what is *natus est* without *invenientis*? Such a one there “is born.” What shall we be the better, if we “find” Him not? As good not born, as not known – to us all one.... *Christus inventus* is more than *Christus natus*. Set down *invenientis* then first.’<sup>2</sup> So the sign is humble, but the sign also signals humility. There is the humility of Christ, of the Son become man, of kenosis.<sup>3</sup> There is also the humility of the shepherds: humans approaching the humble sign with the requisite humility to recognize it as the glorious sign.

With this emphasis on participation, Andrewes works towards defining the difference between signs and miracles. In a paragraph alluded to in ‘Gerontion’, he writes with reproof that ‘Signs are taken for wonders. “Master, we would fain see a sign,” (Mat. xii. 38), that is a

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<sup>1</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons on the Nativity* (London: Griffith Farran Okeden and Welsh, 1887), 200.

<sup>2</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 193.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of kenosis see my Introduction, 20–21.

miracle'.<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees' plea is for unequivocal, or at least unilateral, proof of Christ's divinity – hard evidence that requires no analysis or involvement from the witness. They seek a 'wonder' and not a 'sign'; the humble birth is not the wonder desired or the amazement that attends theophany. Admonishingly, Andrewes restates the 'lesson of the cratch' and its logic of mutual return: '*humilis nascitur humilibus*' ['He was humbly born for the humble']. On the one hand are those who see the nativity for what it is, partly because they realise their own wretchedness and partly because they realise the significance of the Incarnation. On the other hand are the proud, for whom the nativity is '*signum contra vos*' [a sign against you]. Aware how this separation might be misconstrued, Andrewes negates any hint of predestination by soberly indicating that it is ubiquitous human pride that necessitated Christ's act of love: 'For all this was not so much to shew the love in Himself, as to work in God... "good-will toward men,"... to regain His Father's love to make Him well-pleased toward men by His humility, with whom *for their pride* He was justly displeased.'<sup>2</sup>

The second message of the sermon adumbrates the mutually reflective significance of the Incarnation and the Passion – a hallmark of the 'low style' of the *sermo humilis*, the humble sermon.<sup>3</sup> If the cratch signals humility, it also foreshadows the suffering of the crucifixion. Andrewes reminds his congregation that as partakers of the Eucharist on Christmas day they acknowledge Christ's death as consummating his birth. Indeed, he argues that the discovery of the Incarnation mystery, the *invenientis* of its meaning, depends on a discovery of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross: 'For finding His flesh and blood, ye cannot miss but find Him too.... For Christ in the Sacrament is not altogether unlike Christ in the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 200.

<sup>2</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 205, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> See Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 151: 'In antique theory, the sublime and elevated style was called *sermo gravis* or *sublimis*; the low style was *sermo remissus* or *humilis*; the two had to be kept strictly separated. In the world of Christianity, on the other hand, the two merged, especially in Christ's Incarnation and Passion, which realize and combine *sublimitas* and *humilitas* in overwhelming measure.'

cratch.’<sup>1</sup> When Andrewes turns to the final verse of his scripture reading – the verse in *Murder*’s sermon – he asserts that the praise rendered unto God by men achieves its fullest significance when they have partaken of the sacrament: ‘For then sure of all other times are we on earth most near to Angelic perfection, then meetest to give glory unto God, then at peace with the whole earth, then a good-will and purpose in us if ever.’

This telescoping of Christ’s birth and death is a familiar Eliotic motif. ‘Gerontion’, as mentioned, assimilates phrases from this and another sermon (XV) in the following stanza:

Signs are taken for wonders. ‘We would see a sign!’  
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,  
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger (*PTSEI*, 31)

Eliot’s pointed rendering of Andrewes’s ‘Christ is no wild-cat’ as ‘Christ the tiger’ conveys the discomfiting, dangerous implications of the advent and the crucifixion. The neologism ‘juvescence’ allows for a temporal ambiguity that envelops both the new calendar year and also the vernal regeneration of the natural world. In this simultaneity there is no lapse of time between Epiphany and Easter. ‘The Journey of the Magi’, too, frames Christ’s birth as an event of ‘Hard and bitter agony’ (*PTSEI*, 102). And in ‘The Cultivation of Christmas Trees’, the meaning of Christmas is ‘concentrated into a great joy / Which shall be also a great fear’ (*PTSEI*, 109-110). Yet the dichotomies of eternity and temporality, of innocence and sinfulness, of joy and mourning, are given clearest expression in Thomas’s sermon:

[W]henever Mass is said, we re-enact the Passion and Death of Our Lord; and on this Christmas Day we do this in celebration of His Birth. So that at the same moment we rejoice in His coming for the salvation of men, and offer again to God His Body and Blood in sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. It was in the same night that has just passed, that a multitude of the heavenly host appeared before the shepherds at Bethlehem, saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth

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<sup>1</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 210-211.

peace to men of good will'; at this same time of year that we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross. (*CPP*, 260)

The other sermon that is likely to have guided Eliot's hand was delivered by Andrewes in 1619, the very next Christmas, and focused exclusively on Luke 2:14. A point of particular import for the sermon in *Murder* concerns the translation of 'good will'. Permitting himself scholarly flourish before the monarch who was known for his keen interest in theology, Andrewes notes that the Greek and Latin versions apply different cases and thus nuance meaning in different ways: *εὐδοχία* is in the nominative and extends 'good will' itself to 'men', whereas *bonae voluntatis* is in the genitive and limits 'peace' ambiguously to those who are themselves 'of good will' or to those who receive God's favour.<sup>1</sup> The King James Version of 1611, to which Andrewes contributed as translator, follows the Greek nominative ('and towards men good-will'), while the Latin rendering which accompanies the English at the head of the sermon keeps both cases alive: the Vulgate's genitive (*bonae voluntatis*) is parenthetically supplemented by 'good will' in the nominative (*bona voluntas*).<sup>2</sup> But the spirit trounces the letter of the verse, and thus Andrewes writes: "'To men a good-will;" or "to men of good-will" – no great matter, so long as *εὐδοχία* refers to God and to His "good pleasure," not to men or any will of theirs.'<sup>3</sup>

That Eliot would have concurred with the emphasis on *divine* over *human* goodwill is evinced by various remarks. In 'Francis Herbert Bradley' (1927), another *TLS* article collected in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, he dismisses kindness between people as 'inoperative benevolence' and 'a disappointment and a cheat' (*CP3*, 311) if pursued without recognition of the doctrine of Grace. In 'Catholicism and International Order' (1933), the humanitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Andrewes rather strangely gives *εὐδοχίας* to suggest the Latin reading; I have substituted his Greek for the Latin of the Vulgate above.

<sup>2</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 212. Sermon XII, however, gives the verse only as it is found in the Vulgate (193).

<sup>3</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 215.

acts of ‘non-Catholics of good will’ amount only to ‘vague benevolence’ because it is not grounded in ‘moral conversion’ (CP4, 542). Also of 1933, ‘The Modern Dilemma’ reiterates this belief and recycles ‘vague benevolence’ (CP4, 813) once more. And in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), written in the aftermath of the Munich Agreement and published a month after Hitler’s invasion of Poland, Eliot affirmed that ‘only in humility, charity and purity – and most of all perhaps humility – can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain’ (CP5, 735).

A further, more convoluted intertextual clue to Eliot’s misgivings about human goodwill is provided by his specific source for Luke 2:14. The wording of the Gospel reading (‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will’) is not taken from the King James, as might be expected, but from the Douay-Rheims Bible – a fact which has gone unnoticed. With its New Testament published in 1582, the translators of this English Catholic bible sought to supply a palliative to Protestant translations of Holy Scripture. Their preface states that the work of translation was not inspired by the ‘erroneous opinion...that the holy Scriptures should always be in our mother tongue’; rather, it was necessitated by ‘special consideration of the present time, state, and condition of our country, unto which, diverse things are either necessary, or profitable and medicinable now, that otherwise in the peace of the Church were neither much requisite, nor perchance wholly tolerable’.<sup>1</sup>

Counter-Reformation sentiment, however, is not of concern for Eliot’s play; as I have argued, harmony between the Church of England and the Catholic Church is one of the sermon’s subtle achievements and one of Eliot’s long-term preoccupations. A more probable explanation for the choice of translation – and one which accords with Andrewes’s emphasis on God’s goodness – is found in the Douay-Rheims’s annotation to Luke 2:14. The gloss on ‘men of good will’ reads as follows: ‘The birth of Christ giveth not peace of mind or

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<sup>1</sup> Douay-Rheims Bible, or *The Holy Bible: Faithfully Translated into English out of the Authentical Latin, diligently conferred with the Hebrew, Greek, & Other Editions in Divers Languages*, (Rouen: John Cousturier, 1636), i. Page numbers refer to those given in the New Testament. I have provided standardized spelling.



salvation but to such as be of good will, because he worketh not our good against our wills, but our wills concurring.’<sup>1</sup> Here is conjunction between the grace of the Incarnation and the necessity of human submission and humility in order to partake of that grace. As Sermon XII makes clear, Andrewes similarly sees in the Lucan nativity account the significance of such ‘wills concurring’. When he writes that ‘[w]e shall not be better for *natus est*, if we find him not’, Andrewes suggests that though grace is given, it requires participation.<sup>2</sup> That said, neither he nor the Douay-Rheims translators suggest level standing between divine and human operations. For his part, Andrewes stresses that no mortal *finding* of the sign is possible without its heavenly *gratuitousness*. His exegesis progresses from the sign’s literal manifestation (the star of Bethlehem, the choir of Angels) to its spiritual signification (the humble surroundings indicating Christ’s humility to submit to temporal conditions). Finally, he arrives at its ‘co-indicant’ theological meaning, love:

Indicant it is of humility; co-indicant of that which in Him and on His part, as pride on ours, was the cause that made Him stoop to this humility, and that was His love. He left *gloriam in excelsis* for *εὐδοχία ἐν ἀνθρώποις*, ‘His glory on high,’ for ‘His good-will towards men.’ It was a sign of love too this.<sup>3</sup>

Between both sermons (XII and XIII) there is perfect consistency in their exposition of ‘good-will’: whether ‘goodwill towards men’ or ‘peace to men of good-will’, goodwill itself is constituted by God’s love and grace.

This view is compatible with that held by St Augustine in his *Miscellany of Questions in Response to Simplician*, which is cited in the Douay-Rheims annotation to Luke 2:14. The work, Augustine’s first as Bishop of Hippo, was written between 396-398 and attempted to

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<sup>1</sup> Douay-Rheims, 142.

<sup>2</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 195.

<sup>3</sup> Andrewes, *Seventeen Sermons*, 204.

answer two questions on St Paul's letter to the Romans.<sup>1</sup> The reference given in the Douay-Rheims annotation is to the second question, which grapples with 'a theology of human merit and divine grace based upon the Genesis narrative of Jacob and Esau'.<sup>2</sup> At the outset, Augustine restates the central thought in Romans 9:10-11: 'no one should boast of the merits of his works.' Grace is thus given by God and not earned through human righteousness: 'good works...do not beget grace but are begotten by grace.'<sup>3</sup> The specific section cited in the Douay-Rheims (2.10) reflects on God's love for Jacob and his rejection of Esau (Rom 9:13) and asks whether God's favour may, in part, depend on an individual's will to faith. 'Is it the case,' Augustine enquires, 'that, because no one can believe unless he wills to and no one can will to unless he is called, but no one can confer it upon himself to be called, God, by calling, also confers faith, because no one can believe without being called, although no one believes unwillingly?'<sup>4</sup> The given answer is not without controversy: as one scholar demonstrates, Augustine's view of predestination in the *Response to Simplician* constitutes a revision of his earlier position.<sup>5</sup> Formerly he had espoused the belief that election had its basis in God's foreknowledge of faith. In the present work he asserts God's grace as the absolute determining criterion for salvation. Yet careful not to encourage spiritual idleness, Augustine urges responsiveness to the divine call:<sup>6</sup>

It is necessary...to will and to run, for it was not without purpose that it was said,  
*Peace on earth to men of good will* (Lk 2:14), and, *Run in such a way that you may*

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions: Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions; Miscellany of Questions in Response to Simplician; and Eight Questions of Dulcitius*, Part 1, Volume 12, intro. and trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York, NY: New City Press, 2008), 161.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsey in Augustine, *Responses*, 163.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Responses*, 185, 187.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Responses*, 193.

<sup>5</sup> James Wetzel, 'Predestination, Pelagianism, and Foreknowledge', *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 53-54.

<sup>6</sup> In 'The Pensées of Pascal', Eliot gives a compact summary of Augustine's conception of grace (CP4, 346): 'The Pelagians, who were refuted by St. Augustine, emphasised the efficacy of human effort and belittled the importance of supernatural grace. The Calvinists emphasized the degradation of man through Original Sin, and considered mankind so corrupt that the will was of no avail; and thus fell into the doctrine of predestination. It was upon the doctrine of grace according to St. Augustine that the Jansenists relied; and the *Augustinus* of Jansenius was presented as a sound exposition of the Augustinian views.'

*seize the prize* (1 Cor 9:24). Yet *it is not a matter of willing or of running but of a merciful God* that we obtain what we will and arrive where we will.... For in one way God bestows so that we may will, and in another he bestows what we have willed. For he has willed that our willing be both his and ours – his by calling and ours by following. He alone bestows, however, what we have willed – that is, the ability to act well and to live blessedly forever.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever subtle theological differences may divide them, Augustine's emphasis on divine goodwill corresponds with Andrewes's, and there is concurrence in the sermon of the fictionalised Thomas. For Augustine, 1 Cor 4:7 supplies the scriptural basis for the supremacy of grace; in both of Andrewes's sermons, 'goodwill' is clearly a divine property; and Thomas concludes that martyrdom is the 'design of God' and an outflow of 'His love for men' (*CPP*, 261). The three also converge in their encouragement of ready submission and action on the part of believers. Augustine's view is clear enough above. Andrewes's Sermon XII, to reiterate, declares the necessity of humility in order to understand the Incarnation and the Passion as the kenotic expression of grace. And Thomas – having been tempted by spiritual pride in Part I – recognizes that a martyr must become 'the instrument of God' and 'los[e] his will in the will of God' (*CPP*, 261). Both these components – the primacy of grace and the secondary response of man – are balanced in the Lucan verse. It is in this doctrinal light that Eliot's engagement with Andrewes and the Douay-Rheims translation should be read, and so too his fundamental scepticism about human operations removed from the love of God.

### **'Disappointment and a cheat' I: philosophical scepticism**

Following his palimpsest evocation of Good Friday on Christmas, Thomas asks whether the angels' proclamation of peace amid a time of strife is spurious: 'Does it seem to you that the

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Responses*, 193.

angelic voices were mistaken, and that the promise was a disappointment and a cheat?’ (CPP, 260). The answer – if foreign and domestic concord, communal stability, and personal security are taken as criteria – is yes. But ‘disappointment and a cheat’, with the sceptical freight it drags into the play, intimates that human measures of peace and goodness are themselves illusory.

Eliot encountered the phrase in the conclusion to F. H. Bradley’s *Principles of Logic* (1883). Here Bradley communicates the hope that the world of phenomena may ultimately gesture towards a supreme reality that is not entirely incompatible with what we already know in quotidian experience:

That the glory of this world in the end is appearance leaves the world more glorious, if we feel it a show of some fuller splendour; but the sensuous curtain is a *deception and a cheat*, if it hides some colourless movement of atoms, some spectral woof of impalpable abstractions, or unearthly ballet of bloodless categories.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot’s esteem of the passage is evinced in his borrowings and recasting. He claims in a graduate essay that Bertrand Russell’s *Principia Mathematica* is ‘directing with passionate enthusiasm his unearthly ballet of bloodless alphabets’ (CPI, 90). He also quotes the Bradley passage as an example of masterly prose in 1917 and again a decade later (CPI, 540 and CP3, 306).

But by severing ‘deception and a cheat’ from its epistemological spring and inserting it into theological contexts, Eliot made the phrase his own. In one form or another, it occurs six times in his writing, invariably as a kind of shorthand for the hollowness of human goodwill divorced from the love of God. *Murder in the Cathedral* twice employs the words, first in the Four Tempters’ catalogue of vain earthly pursuits (CPP, 256), and then in the sermon itself. In ‘Catholicism and International Order’ (1933), Eliot asserts that ‘the second half of the Summary of the Law is a delusion and a cheat if you erase the first half’ (CP4,

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<sup>1</sup> F. H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic* (New York, NY: G. E. Stechert and Co., 1912), 533, my emphasis.

537).<sup>1</sup> Still earlier, he had declared in his *TLS* review of Bradley's *Ethical Studies* that humanist morality uninformed by 'some doctrine of Grace' constitutes the 'same inoperative benevolence which we have all now and then received – and often resented – from our fellow human beings. In the end it is a *disappointment and a cheat*' (*CP3*, 311, my emphasis). And in a telling letter that documents Eliot's belief in 'saintliness and heroism' as the 'good things in life' (*L3*, 711), we also encounter a profound expression of the vanity he sees in human relations that are undirected by divine grace:

if one makes the relation of man to man (or still more to woman) the highest good, I maintain that it turns out a *delusion and a cheat*. But if two people...love God still more than they love each other, then they enjoy greater love of each other than if they did not love God at all... [F]or one's relations to one's friends and lovers, apart from the love of God, always, in my experience, turn out a *delusion and a cheat*. Either they let you down, or you let them down, or both; but no human relation is in itself, satisfactory. (*L3*, 712, my emphasis; 18 Sept, 1927)

Circumscribed at either end by Eliot's confirmation in the Church of England and his recent sundering from Vivien in 1933, the bitterness in most of these reiterations cannot wholly be read in isolation from biography. When he wrote the above letter to Geoffrey Faber, Eliot had already resigned himself to an 'absolutely hostile' (*L2*, 627) marital situation and would within the next year take a vow of celibacy. By the time he instructed solicitors to draw up a deed of separation in 1933, lovelessness had reached its nadir. '[T]he whole history,' he confessed with defeated detachment, 'has been from the beginning a hideous farce to me' (*L6*, 553). Yet to see Eliot's attitude towards interpersonal relations – whether in the form of romantic, friendly, or neighbourly love – as defined solely by his tortuous private life is to neglect two contiguous aspects: an entrenched philosophical scepticism about human

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mark 12:30-31: 'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.'

goodwill which stretches back as far as his graduate years, and an eventual belief that divine grace is the sanctioning element in our love for others.

Philanthropy as an end in itself, particularly in a liberal humanistic cast, is a major point of contention in the writings of the early 1930s. Eliot held grave doubts about the ‘myth of human goodness [that] replaces belief in Divine Grace’ (CP3, 117), a myth he closely associated with Unitarianism. But as certainly as these doubts were tinged by a definite theological perspective during his Christian life, they were first shaded by the intractable scepticism he evinced as a philosophy graduate between 1913 and 1916. The ‘Report on the Ethics of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*’ is a representative piece of doubting inquiry that supplies a philosophical and uncanny lexical background against which to interpret the eventual animadversion of ‘vague’ or ‘inoperative benevolence’.<sup>1</sup>

In the essay, a 24 year-old Eliot details certain limits of the categorical imperative and targets two principles that underpin it: Kant’s conception of ‘good will’, and his notion of humanity as an ‘end in itself’. At the start of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant explains that good will is the only pure and unconditional good that exists; its goodness is *a priori* and thus not contingent on any positive outcomes it might achieve. ‘A good will is...only [good] because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favour of some inclination and indeed, if you will, the sum of all inclinations.’<sup>2</sup> Eliot admits the position (“‘good will’ is the only direct value’) but immediately relativizes it in a way that cuts across the grain of Kant’s deontology. ‘[I]t is soon seen,’ he writes, ‘that good will is an indirect value also: a world without contingent goods is not a good world’ (CPI, 54). The contention is that the good will is not as impervious to relations and external objects as Kant

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<sup>1</sup> M. A. R. Habib gives most comprehensive account of Eliot’s engagement with Kant, though he does not explore Eliot’s references to Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. See Habib, ‘The Prayers of Childhood: T. S. Eliot’s Manuscripts on Kant’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51, no. 1 (1990): 93-114.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8.

would suggest. Ultimately, it ‘must be a particular good will’ – that of an individual – and thus the ‘categorical imperative has meaning only in relation to...arbitrarily chosen goal[s]’. Whether Eliot’s qualifications are valid is not of concern; more significant is his scepticism about a goodness that is fundamental to all humanity and from which moral actions are supposed to emanate.

The second point of attack draws into question Kant’s postulate of humanity as an end in itself and the practical imperative that issues from it: ‘*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*’<sup>1</sup> What upholds this imperative is a belief in human beings’ absolute worth, which in turn predicates on the givenness of the good will. Eliot is doubtful about humanity’s position within Kant’s kingdom of ends. He opines that ‘it is not only inexact but dangerous...to regard humanity...as more than a provisionally postulated end’ (*CPI*, 54-55). Further on the case is put even more strongly: ‘If humanity is the end (absolutely), the idea of the *Summum Bonum* [the highest good] is only a means. And unless the *Summum Bonum* is the end, humanity is meaningless’ (*CPI*, 55). Eliot claims that the strictures which apply to Kant’s deontology (thus the fundamental fact of ‘good will’) also apply to his teleology (the ‘Kingdom of ends’). This means that the universality of these ends is in question. While the preservation of human dignity is a commendable goal, it is nonetheless subject to each individual’s acknowledgement and active pursuit of it as such, which is far from given.

Earlier in the essay Eliot provides an example that demonstrates the relativity or, at its extreme, exclusivity to which the categorical imperative appears susceptible. Agents who perform an act that is ‘wholly bad’ do so because they recognize the rightness (thus Enlightenment ‘reasonableness’) of their actions in a given situation for themselves. Despite

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, 38.

its ‘sinfulness’, any reasonable persons who were to find themselves in that position would act similarly. But Heraclitean flux undermines the universality of the categorical imperative: ‘as the same situation never recurs, one may say that the categorical imperative is always, or that it is never, operative’ (*CPI*, 54, Eliot’s emphasis). Both positions have the same negative import for the categorical imperative’s absolute status. The latter is defended on the historicist perspective that ‘[i]t will not explain any system of values that is ever actually found in human history’, while the former implicitly rests on Bradleian-inflected scepticism about the possibility of shared experience. Ultimately, the ethical problem should be seen in light of an epistemological problem: the possibility of identical moral action for different moral agents in the same situation depends on their experiencing the situation identically.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the categorical imperative is always operative in the realm of ideas where the contingencies of time and perspective are void. On the other hand, it is never operative in reality, since no two moral agents can live through the exact same experience. In either case, humanity as an end is subject to ‘inoperative benevolence’, which is not to say that goodwill has no value, but only that its value is relative rather than absolute. The best we can do is to ‘think of the key, each in his prison’ (*PTSEI*, 70).

This early philosophical scepticism about human goodwill lingers as a presence in *Murder*. Speaking together not unlike the self-deceiving Hollow Men, the Four Tempters declare man’s life ‘a cheat and a disappointment’ as they submit a catalogue of vanities into evidence:

Man’s life is a cheat and a disappointment;  
 All things are unreal,  
 Unreal or disappointing:  
 The Catherine wheel, the pantomime cat,  
 The prizes given at a children’s party,

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<sup>1</sup> This irreconcilability between ‘finite centres’ or individual points of view is rendered even more starkly by the passage in *Appearance and Reality* highlighted in *The Waste Land*’s ‘Notes’ (*PTSEI*, 76-77).



The prize awarded for the English Essay,  
The scholar's degree, the statesman's decoration.  
All things become less real, man passes  
From unreality to unreality.  
This man is obstinate, blind, intent  
On self-destruction. (*CPP*, 256)

There is a poignant escalation in these anachronistic instances of worldly desire. Most of them invite us to recognize Eliot's own pursuit of literary, social, and even spiritual accomplishment. Implicit in these deceptions, but particularly in the determination for 'self-destruction', is a wary view of human benevolence that shares something of the prayerful doubt in *Choruses from the Rock*: there hangs a shadow over the 'man of excellent intention and impure heart', since 'the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked' (*PTSE1*, 165). This sentiment would resurface as the third 'gift reserved for age' in *Little Gidding*: 'the shame / Of motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue' (205). What unifies the various types of 'disappointment' in the play is the satisfaction of human will. When the phrase recurs four pages on in the sermon, an inversion is achieved. Thomas rhetorically asks whether the prevalence of strife on earth means that the 'angelic voices were mistaken, and that the promise was a disappointment and a cheat' (*CPP*, 260). And having realised that to 'do the right deed for the wrong reason' (258) is tantamount to sin, he urges submission to a grace, goodwill, and peace that is beyond human design.

### **'Disappointment and a cheat' II: Bradley and the doctrine of grace**

If the essay on Kant shows Eliot's philosophical misgivings about an unfluctuating human goodwill to be underpinned by epistemological variance, his later theological misgivings

pivot on an unwavering belief in the doctrines of the incarnation, original sin, and grace.<sup>1</sup> The first two of these, as Eliot would have known, are directly addressed in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion as sanctioned by the Church of England since 1571. Grace, however, is treated more tangentially and presents, as ceded in the Church of England's report on Christian doctrine, a complex matter.<sup>2</sup>

In the Articles it is stated that fallen humanity cannot of its own volition turn to God, nor can it do any good deeds 'pleasant and acceptable to God, *without the grace of God by Christ preventing us*, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will'. An exposition on the Articles explains that there are thus two types of grace. The first is prevenient grace, which has its foundation in Christ's freely given sacrifice. It is this type of grace to which the lines in *East Coker* refer: '...if we do well, we shall / Die of the absolute paternal care / That will not leave us, but *prevents* us everywhere (*PTSE1*, 190, my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> The second type of grace is cooperative grace, which enables the 'renewed man to exert himself in the strength of that grace, and to work under its influence'.<sup>4</sup> Declaring that faith in Christ is the sole criterion for salvation and that good works flow from such faith, the Articles emphatically view the grace of Christ as the sanctioning element for any good deed that is acceptable to God. Without this grace, no moral action has any worth.

Such an understanding of cooperative grace is pointedly reflected in Thomas's sermon: '[A martyrdom] is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God...' (*CPP*, 261). Eliot would later amend these words slightly in the *Film of Murder in the Cathedral* (82, my emphasis) in

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot was 'inexorably committed to the dogma of Incarnation' (*CP4*, 342), assented that the 'classicist point of view...is essentially a belief in Original Sin' (*CP2*, 472), and denounced 'the myth of human goodness which for liberal thought replaces the belief in Divine Grace' (*CP3*, 117).

<sup>2</sup> *Doctrine in the Church of England: The Report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine Appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938), 52.

<sup>3</sup> Ricks and McCue's annotation indicates that the Book of Common Prayer is echoed: 'That thy grace maye always prevente and folowe us' (*PTSE1*, 949).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Harold Browne, *An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles, Historical and Doctrinal*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894), 271.

order to emphasise *cooperative* grace: ‘A martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, *who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God.*’ Again Augustine and Andrewes come into focus: God’s love is inaugural; it foregoes, initiates, and ultimately sustains human love.

Surprisingly, F. H. Bradley may also be mentioned in this connection with grace. With the first republication of *Ethical Studies* in 1927, Eliot took the opportunity to bring wider public attention to the British Idealist’s thought and ‘attitude of extreme diffidence’ (CP3, 304). As much as the review extolled Bradley’s virtues as prose writer and ethicist, it also sought to score a polemical victory for religion against humanism. A line in the sand is drawn between a slightly plumped-up Bradley and a somewhat hollowed-out Matthew Arnold and Irving Babbitt. The former is startlingly compared with John Henry Newman, his philosophy labelled as ‘catholic, civilized, and universal’ (the third adjective cancelling out the suggestion that the first is meant in its general etymological sense), and his avowal of Protestant belief suppressed through selective quotation.<sup>1</sup> The latter two are harshly yoked together in their failure to perceive the necessity of conforming one’s private will to that of the divine:

[I]t is a process which neither Arnold nor Professor Babbitt could accept. But [if] there is a ‘will of God,’ as Arnold, in a hasty moment, admits, then some *doctrine of Grace* must be admitted too; or else the ‘will of God’ is just the same *inoperative benevolence* which we have all now and then received – and often resented – from our fellow human beings. In the end it is a *disappointment and a cheat*. (CP3, 311, my emphasis)

Ostensibly demonstrating the suitability of Bradley’s prose for his subject, Eliot’s review rehearses a minor skirmish in the ‘Concluding Remarks’ of *Ethical Studies*. With

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<sup>1</sup> See F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (London: Henry S. King and Co., 1876), 289.

lengthy quotations from the book, the essay offers a ventriloquized critique of Arnold's dual emphasis on the salvific function of 'righteousness' and the need for verifiability in religion. Bradley's footnotes point the reader to Arnold's two-part defence of *Literature and Dogma* (1873) in the pages of *The Contemporary Review*, where Arnold explains that his efforts were born out of the conviction of the 'indispensableness of the Bible'.<sup>1</sup> But Bradley is impatient with what he sees as a fundamentally vacillating Christianity. He derides Arnold's religious outlook as 'literary clap-trap' that '[leaves us] with the assertion that "righteousness" is "salvation" or "welfare"', imputing to his contemporary a facile eudemonistic outlook that eliminates the need for the grace of God.<sup>2</sup>

The implicit charge of Pelagianism is Eliot's cue. His own critique of Arnold focuses on the claim that the function of culture is to make 'reason and the will of God prevail' – a mantra repeated several times in *Culture and Anarchy*.<sup>3</sup> Eliot's concern is that the 'will of God' subserves the judgement of an anthropocentric culture that entertains thoughts of perfectibility.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, for Eliot the belief in human perfectibility is anathema to the doctrine of original sin. Yet the charge brought against Arnold is that he conceives of goodwill as impelled by humanity's own rational capacity – by 'our best self' or 'right reason' (L3, 310) – rather than by grace. Eliot's critique of Arnold (and Babbitt) is analogous with his critique of Kant: both the categorical imperative and 'our best self' are seen as standards for conduct subject to individual caprice. What Eliot sought instead was something more substantial than 'sweetness and light and culture' (L5, 210). Twelve years

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Review of Objections to *Literature and Dogma*, I', *The Contemporary Review* XXIV (1874): 796.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 283. Lee Oser persuasively argues that Bradley's vitriol is misguided since Arnold did not unequivocally equate virtue with happiness. See Oser, *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 9. 'Culture,' Arnold pronounces in his preface, 'is the study of perfection [which] leads us...to conceive of true human perfection as a *harmonious* perfection, developing all sides of our humanity; and as a general perfection, developing all parts of our society.'

after the publication of 'Cousin Nancy', Arnold still remained a 'guardian of [a] faith' (*PTSEI*, 24) which Eliot could not accept.

Given that *Culture and Anarchy* defines 'our best self' in relation to the importance of institutional checks and against 'doing as one likes' – and given his own endorsement of the Hulmean belief in the necessity of institutions (*CP4*, 164) – Eliot too glibly equates 'our best self' with 'Matthew Arnold slightly disguised' (*CP3*, 310).<sup>1</sup> His reading of the term is qualified by its perceived relation to Irving Babbitt's 'inner check', the implication being that excessive emphasis is placed on the individual's capacity to supply the necessary restraint where the 'curbs of class, or authoritative government, and of religion' are found wanting.<sup>2</sup> Any doctrine of self-control, Eliot explains elsewhere, only has significance within religion (*CP3*, 457). This is the main complaint against both Arnold and Babbitt: the former, a proto-humanist, allows 'Culture... to usurp the place of Religion' (*CP4*, 178), while the latter attempts to make 'humanism itself into a Religion' (*CP3*, 457).<sup>3</sup>

In 'The Humanism of Irving Babbitt' (1928), Eliot diagnoses the failings of the ethical principles of his old professor as a 'dread of organized religion' (*CP3*, 458) which apparently springs from a belief that religion petrifies the autonomous individual spirit. This fear, Eliot suggests, is due to a misconception of the way in which religion directs morality. It is not the function of the Church to police bad behaviour, but to engender a supreme '*inner control*' which repairs to an absolute moral standard and so differs from the '[precarious] private notions and...judgement' (*CP3*, 458) by which the humanist sets his moral compass. Implicit in this understanding is the belief in grace, which is 'prior...to that "supernatural" goodness or sanctification which results from the work of the Holy Spirit *in and through* the

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold writes that 'culture suggests the idea of *the State*. We find no basis for a firm State-power in our ordinary selves; culture suggests one to us in our *best self*'. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 71.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 150: 'The permanent or ethical element in [man] towards which he should strive to move is known to him practically as a power of inhibition or inner check upon expansive desire.'

<sup>3</sup> Placed in relation to those categories of humility discussed in the thesis introduction, both Arnold and Babbitt may be seen as proponents of 'democratic humility'. See Introduction, 17-19.

Church'.<sup>1</sup> Though Eliot does not mention it directly, his claim about Babbitt's misapprehension is very probably elicited by the negative conception of grace put forth in *Democracy and Leadership*.<sup>2</sup> Here Babbitt hails the 'critical attitude' of the Reformers because it paved the way for independence and 'private judgement' (the language pays subtle homage to the self-reliance of Emerson and Kant's *Aufklärung*). But he also laments the resurgence of the doctrine of grace since it proved a stumbling block on the way to enlightenment: 'the Pauline and Augustinian form that a Luther or a Calvin sought to revive, was the very negation of self-reliance; it was designed to make man feel his utter and helpless dependence on the divine will.'<sup>3</sup>

Neither Luther nor Calvin, but certainly Paul, Augustine, and Andrewes inform Eliot's understanding of the doctrine of grace. And if 'our best self' and the 'inner check' amount to a disappointment and a cheat, if the benevolence of Arnold and Babbitt is inoperative because of a failure to admit the role of grace, Eliot finds a humbler, more doctrinally sound alternative in Bradley's thinking:

How can the human-divine ideal ever be my will? The answer is, Your will it never can be as the will of your private self, so that your private self should become wholly good. To that self you must die, and by faith be made one with the ideal. You must resolve to give up your will, as the mere will of this or that man, and you must put your whole self, your entire will, into the will of the divine. That must be your one self, as it is your true self; that you must hold to both with thought and will, and all other you must renounce.<sup>4</sup>

Eliot quotes this passage (CP3, 310) from *Ethical Studies* and cedes that it might appear compatible with both Arnold's and Babbitt's 'eminent doctrines'. It corresponds in

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<sup>1</sup> *Doctrine in the Church of England*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> See L3, 491: 'I have had in suspense in my mind an essay pointing out Babbitt's (unconscious) relation to orthodox Christianity: his doctrine of Grace, in *Democracy and Leadership*, is singularly near to Christianity, and in my opinion cannot be made acceptable without Christianity.'

<sup>3</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 188.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 290.

acknowledgement of imperfection, endeavours towards its opposite, and conveys a message of self-abnegation. It also advocates a kind of self-surrender which risks dissolving the believer and the object of belief in an undifferentiated monistic whole: pursued to its logical conclusion, Bradley's philosophy 'might diminish the value and dignity of the individual' (310). But the issue is not laboured, and it appears that Eliot chooses not to expand on this danger since there are polemical points to be scored: just like good 'Arnold-baiting', persuasive Bradley-plumbing requires strategic lighting. Helen Thaventhiran has written perceptively about Eliot's forestalling tactics when quoting, but the present case rather gives the impression of an eagerness to pass over objections rather than a readiness to meet them: 'in any event' and 'in all events' (310-311), no matter the metaphysical niceties, Bradley is not like Arnold or Babbitt.<sup>1</sup> And the fundamental difference is that no gradation of selfhood such as the schema of ordinary or best self is admitted. 'The distinction,' Eliot asserts, 'is between the individual as himself and no more, a mere numbered atom, and the individual in communion with God' (310). The highest good, then, is not determined by the beckoning of a better self, but by a spiritual reality that surpasses mere morality.

For Bradley, like Eliot, religion alone facilitates such transcendence while at the same time preserving the practical necessity of morality. In *Appearance and Reality*, religion is characterized by a profound humility through which individuals recognize the object of devotion as infinitely greater than themselves and so feel 'quite powerless and worthless'.<sup>2</sup> In words mirrored by Eliot's letter to Geoffrey Faber (see page 123 above), Bradley comments on the existence of 'incomplete forms of religion' such as the adoration of a lover or commitment to a cause, explaining that these are incommensurate with the 'highest sense of religion' in which there is one unchanging object of good. Love or causes may inspire fear, but they are also susceptible to feelings of rebellion. Religion, seen in contrast and

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<sup>1</sup> See Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 48-57.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley, *Appearance*, 439.

understood as an awe-inspired realisation of humility, implies ‘moral prostration’.<sup>1</sup> This moral prostration is not some kind of antihumanist degradation of the will which culminates in aboulia or Calvinist notions of predestination, but rather an acknowledgement that religion fulfils morality.<sup>2</sup>

Logically, morality is an ideal which can never be attained, since to do so implies a negation of its very conditions: ‘Where there is no imperfection there is no ought, where there is no ought there is no morality.’<sup>3</sup> In itself, morality predicates on a frustration of its ends, and it is only through religion that this frustration can be overcome. Both *Ethical Studies* and *Appearance and Reality* posit religion as a practical belief system inscribed with moral duty. The difference, again, between ‘mere’ morality and morality realised *within* religion is that while the former is ontologically locked in potentiation (‘ought to’), the latter is actual: ‘The importance for practice of this religious point of view is that what is to be done is approached, not with the knowledge of a doubtful success, but with the forefelt certainty of already accomplished victory.’<sup>4</sup>

This seeming paradox – to strive for the fulfilment of what is already fulfilled – constitutes the crux of Bradley’s conception of faith. Its formula is belief working in conjunction with the will; faith has both an intellectual and a volitional component. Dichotomously, the former is the ideal of morality (perfection) which is now realized as a result of its giftedness (or grace), while the latter is the continued practice of morality despite the fulfilment of its end (as prescribed by belief).<sup>5</sup> Belief is thus made up of the intellectual assent that the ideal is real, or that goodness is consummated, and that this consummation is independent of my actions. This, in turn, nuances the moral prostration experienced in

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley, *Appearance*, 439-440.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *CP4*, 346: ‘The Calvinists emphasized the degradation of man through Original Sin, and considered mankind so corrupt that the will was of no avail; and thus fell into the doctrine of predestination.’

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 298.

<sup>5</sup> Bradley, *Appearance*, 441.



religion as an attitude of humility in which I simultaneously acknowledge the grace of an infinitely greater Other and that this grace depends on none of my own moral endeavour. What prevents such belief from culminating in quietist despair is the volitional component. The will, for its part, locates faith in a practical sphere and depends for its realisation on operating in spite of the belief that evil is already overruled. Faith's maxim, in Bradley's words, is this: 'Be sure that opposition to good is overcome, and nevertheless act as if it were there.'<sup>1</sup>

Though Eliot recognized the danger of Bradley's monism, he approved its dual emphasis on belief and will – the striving of the Christian sinner on the surety of his salvation – since it approaches 'some doctrine of Grace' (my emphasis). He knew that the philosopher's quasi-mystical ethics, though shaded by Christian doctrine, was by no means orthodox.<sup>2</sup> But more triumphant in polemic than right in reason, the *TLS* essay sought a means of realigning theories of culture and conduct with Christian religion and, more specifically, with a doctrinal position which regards as inoperative any human endeavour divorced from the love of God. If it is as 'colouring...that Bradley stayed in [Eliot's] mind', as Hugh Kenner remarked, it is the same colouring that tints Thomas Becket's message: worldly peace and goodwill are a disappointment and a cheat, and only divine grace promises some fuller show of splendour.<sup>3</sup>

### **'Not as the world gives': Christian sacrifice**

A second verse of scripture in the sermon of *Murder in the Cathedral* further threads the theme of divine peace. Having considered the angelic annunciation of good tidings at the Saviour's birth, Thomas reflects on Christ's message to his disciples shortly before His death

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley, *Appearance*, 443.

<sup>2</sup> See Eliot to P. E. More on 10 Aug, 1930: 'I admit freely that I am a Bradleian; and that my thought and my belief may be more deeply influenced by Bradley than I know. And that between different doctrines, I choose that which seems to me the "less false", inasmuch as there are degrees of untruth' (*LS*, 292).

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London: Methuen, 1965), 39.

on the cross: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world gives, give I unto you' (John 14:27). The tension between joy and mourning is drawn out by the tension between the two Gospel passages: if the Lucan verse exults, the Johannine verse exhorts. For Eliot, who confided to John Hayward that the 'peace of God' is an 'extraordinarily painful blessing' (L5, 163), Christian giving was deeply implicated in sacrifice and submission.

Prior to *Murder in the Cathedral*, John 14:27 occurs in two of Eliot's public addresses delivered in the early 1930s. The first of these is 'The Search for Moral Sanction' (1932), penultimate in a series of BBC radio broadcasts in which Eliot addressed the relation between politics, science, economics and Christian religion.<sup>1</sup> Responding at the outset to letters received after the first programme ('Christianity and Communism'), he draws sharp division between the 'philosophies' of communism and Christianity. 'It may seem a paradox,' he says,

but the Christian wants a better social order just [because] he believes that the world is transient and secondary. And in Christianity there must always be a residue of Tragedy in this world and its satisfactions. There are very profound implications, in the terrible words: '*Not as the world gives, give I unto you*' (CP4, 446, my emphasis).

The capitalized 'Tragedy' serves as a shorthand recapitulation of moral values Eliot had catalogued in the preceding two talks. During the first he had declared that Christianity provided him personally with the only viable scheme within which to maintain his 'belief in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity' (CP4, 428). The following broadcast supplied a near-verbatim list of virtues, adding only 'asceticism' and 'the belief in [Christian] Tragedy' (CP4, 439).

The second address that alluded to the Gospel scripture and similarly enfolded it in a call for austere religious discipline is 'The Modern Dilemma', delivered on 3 April, 1933, to the Boston Association of Unitarian Ministers under the title, 'Two Masters'. Hardly enthused about the prospect of addressing Unitarian clergymen though eventually yielding to

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<sup>1</sup> The talk, originally titled 'The Modern Dilemma', was broadcast on 20 March, 1932.

repeated invitation, Eliot made little effort to hide his espousal of Catholic doctrine and his distaste for Unitarian tepidity. A specious disclaimer that the lecture does not present ‘an argument in favor of Catholicism’ (*CP4*, 811) is soon undercut by an unflattering comparison between ‘conservatives’ and Catholics. Conservatives are concerned with mere ‘habits and conventions’, with the vestigial mores of preceding Christian generations (Eliot also made this criticism of Arnold [see *CP4*, 661]); they fail to see pride as a deadlier sin than sexual immorality and do not realise the spiritual danger implicit in feeling virtuous. As a consequence, both their denouncement of what Eliot had once called ‘Bad Form’ (*L3*, 228) and their over-estimation of ethical and reformist action implicate them in lukewarm humanitarianism. The fundamental distinction between the conservative and the Catholic, as he sees it, is a belief in the supernatural.

Despite Eliot’s weariness with the debate over humanism and religion which dominated so much of his thought and writing between 1928 and 1930, ‘The Modern Dilemma’ reiterates two central concerns from that period: an acknowledgement of human sinfulness, and the need to submit to an authority higher than that of personal conscience.<sup>1</sup> Barely concealing his contempt for the Unitarian soteriology of character and progress, he strikes an unyielding medieval pose, declaring that the modern world is defective on two counts: ‘the decay of the study of Latin and Greek and the dissolution of the monasteries’ (*CP4*, 813).<sup>2</sup> If the perceived privation is tinged by nostalgia for a pre-Reformation world, it is shaded by the need for the asceticism which issues from the ‘sense of sin’. Eliot draws a direct parallel between ‘self-abnegation, self-discipline, and the love of God’. He also argues that the ‘ascetic ideal...seems to me implied in the Summary of the Law’. In subtly barbed language he proceeds to denounce an ethics pursuant of happiness, and pits against it a

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<sup>1</sup> For Eliot’s progressive disinterestedness with the humanism debates, see *L5*, 290, 358-359, 623.

<sup>2</sup> See Clarke, *Vexed Questions*, 14-17. The five doctrines of the ‘new theology’ of Unitarianism are outlined in the book, the last two of which pertain to its soteriological position. That is, salvation can be achieved through character and the belief in humanity’s perpetual progress.

meshed paraphrase of the Summary of the Law and John 14:27: 'But the real love of our neighbour, in and for God, means transcending the bounds of love and benevolence as we know them, and reaching a plane at which what is given is not as the world gives' (813-814).

In 'Catholicism and International Order', a lecture given just three months later, Eliot also invoked the Summary of the Law and reflected on its import at greater length. Here the emphasis is less on austerity and more on a proportional observance of love for God and love for one's neighbour. Without the former, the latter lapses into mere 'humanitarianism' because of an 'excessive love of created beings' (*CP4*, 537). With its echo of St John of the Cross, the statement harks back to the desolate cannibal-isle imagined in *Sweeney Agonistes*, which takes its second epigraph from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.<sup>1</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, Eliot's unfinished play of 1926 centres on the individual soul's awful encounter with absolute moral law.<sup>2</sup> Sweeney sees the sin of the murderer in its eternal aspect and recognizes that no temporal measures (language, law, reform, etc.) can assuage its harrowing implications. The importance of this theological point is undiminished in 1933: 'The conception of individual liberty,' Eliot writes, 'must be based upon the unique importance of every single soul, the knowledge that every man is ultimately responsible for his own salvation or damnation' (*L4*, 537). Where *Sweeney Agonistes*'s focus is on eternal consequences of individual import alone, the essay nuances divine union with an eye on this world and considers the responsibility of Christians within their given economic and political contexts. And congruous with the essay's dual concern, the sermon of *Murder in the Cathedral* emphasises that martyrdom – the ultimate sacrifice – is meant to glorify God and serve one's neighbours: 'A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways' (*CPP*, 261). And although it takes the char-women of the Chorus some time to see Thomas's death as other than a

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<sup>1</sup> See *PTSEI*, 113: 'Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.'

<sup>2</sup> See Ch 1, 61-62.

personal deprivation, they eventually realise that ‘From [the ground of sacrifice] springs that which forever renews the earth’ (*CPP*, 282).

In light of his desire for the austerities of ‘Latin discipline’ (*L4*, 128) and the reestablishment of monastic life, Eliot’s claim that ‘second half of the Summary of the Law is a delusion and a cheat if you erase the first half’ (*CP4*, 537) might appear misanthropic or even heretically unbalanced.<sup>1</sup> But this would be to overlook his appeal for a more deeply humane benevolence, which neither predicates on commitment to ‘any form of temporal order’ but on devotion to the ‘Kingdom of God’ (541), nor enforces one people’s idea of the good on others. With poignancy that carries into the context of both twenty-first century democratic imperialism and extremist tyranny, he writes that ‘it is very difficult for any of us to know in what ways we are superior to other peoples, and in what ways merely different’ (540). Far from advocating pious indifference to secular matters, the essay acknowledges the necessity of Catholic engagement, but engagement which neither sacrifices eternal values to temporal ones nor loses sight of the theological beliefs that impel it in the first place. It is such a view that gives added resonance to Thomas’s sacrifice when he says ‘I give my life / To the Law of God above the Law of Man’ (*CPP*, 274).

In tones superior, however, the Pope of Russell Square asseverates that most ‘devout Protestants’ who ‘interest themselves in public well-doing’ do so without proper examination of their motives, while Catholics have a ‘more definite theology’ to guide them and establish proper balance between ‘head and heart’ (*CP4*, 543). Condescending as the statement is, it reinforces both Bradleian faith (balance of belief and will) and also the point that proper obedience to the Summary of the Law necessarily elevates love of our neighbours from mere subjective ‘interest’ to undeniable obligation.

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot argues that heresy ‘consists in emphasizing one aspect of the mystery to the exclusion of the other’ and claims that this ‘is a natural tendency of the mind’ (*CP4*, 424).

It is not...merely because we happen to be Catholics *and* public-spirited individuals, that we are interested in public and international affairs, but because our Faith is of a kind that compels us to the latter interest. Accordingly, if we are to contribute our share, not merely as citizens, but as Catholic citizens, we must not be content to peruse blue books, newspapers, and political and economic treatises; we must first of all become thoroughly conversant with our own theology. (*CP4*, 542)

The admonishments of the lecture also extend to the political domain where the Catholic is set at odds with proponents of 'Prosperity' and agitators of 'Revolution' (*CP4*, 542). Both democracy (in its most ruthless capitalist guise) and communism are tacitly posited as extremes of materialistic preoccupation between which the believer must navigate. It is not that these or other political systems are devoid of humanitarian benefit (Eliot admits that 'we are always likely to find ourselves allied with non-Catholics of good will'), but that the motives of the secular world are driven by a deterministic and 'vague benevolence' (*CP4*, 542), while the community of faith acts in accordance with the first principles of its theology. As Eliot writes in 'Christianity and Communism' (*CP4*, 428): 'belief comes first and practice second.'

'The Modern Dilemma', too, stresses the primacy of proper belief over proper action. Again, the phrase 'vague benevolence' occurs in conjunction with Eliot's intractable scepticism about the quest for human flourishing untethered from doctrinally sound motives:

We like to interpret the love of our neighbors as ourselves as a vague benevolence, or as practical charity alone. We like to think that as we want to be happy, and have some 'right' to be happy, so we must remember that our neighbors have rights too and that we should try to make them happy: the love of our neighbours becomes fair play, and doing the decent thing. (*CP4*, 813-814)

The anaphoric statement of predilection ('we like'), the pincer-grappled notion of 'right[s]', the coy phrases 'fair play' and 'decent thing' all rhetorically locate 'practical charity' within

what Eliot sees as self-satisfied, self-serving ethics.<sup>1</sup> In the unpublished conclusion to the address, he warned that the dilution of spiritual ideals to a human standard entails a descent into ‘complacency and self-conceit’ since human standards are attainable.<sup>2</sup> What Eliot opposes is not the pursuit of progress but the belief in its possible fulfilment. In the *Criterion* ‘Commentary’ of October, 1932, he expressed the need to balance aspiration and self-knowledge, to temper the desire for a perfect society with the awareness that humans are always at an ‘infinite remove from perfection’ (CP4, 502).<sup>3</sup> Christ’s words in Matt 5:48, ‘*estote perfecti*’ [‘be ye perfect’] are interpreted here, in ‘Christianity and Communism’, and in the Boston address, as an injunction to spiritual progress which aims at but never attains perfection.<sup>4</sup> In one aspect, then, the modern dilemma appears to invite a choice between belief in the achievability of moral equilibrium and belief in unceasing moral striving.

As antidote to the spiritual pride concomitant with human notions of perfectibility Eliot recommends the ideal of saintliness. In a Pauline inversion of logic, saintliness is posited as the lowest possible ideal with the intimation that spiritual progress is inversely proportional to the recognition of one’s fallen nature (CP4, 814). It is a notion borne out by Eliot’s formula, stated during a lecture to Harvard undergraduates also in 1933, that ‘Real Evil is to Bad just as Saintliness and Heroism [are] to Decent Behaviour’ (CP4, 773). It is such recognition which pre-empted the gnomic statement in *East Coker* that ‘humility is endless’: humility is ‘endless’ in that it can never conclude, but it is also ‘endless’ because it

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<sup>1</sup> The passage bears comparison with a statement in the graduate essay, ‘The Ethics of Green and Sidgwick’ (CPI, 159): ‘An act may be right because it produces happiness, but if we perform the act with one eye on the happiness and not on the rightness, it is not altogether a moral act. And yet if we are totally indifferent to others’ happiness, we become worthy of something like moral aversion. The fact is that it is not always moral to be moral.’

<sup>2</sup> Cf. L6, 291: ‘...I am not concerned with how people behave, but with what they think of themselves in their behaviour; and I believe that the man who thinks himself virtuous is in danger of damnation, *whatever* line of conduct he adopts.’

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hulme, *Speculations*, 47: ‘Ethical values are *not* relative to human desires and feelings, but absolute and objective.... Religion supplements this...by its conception of *Perfection*.... In light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can partake of perfection, he can never himself *be* perfect.’

<sup>4</sup> Cf. CP4, 428 and 814.

is not an attainable goal. In the context of both the poem and ‘The Modern Dilemma’, unattainability should not be seen in a negative or discouraging light, but rather as an essential element of saintly sacrifice – a giving that is not as the world gives. As both the content and performativity of Eliot’s sermon and sermonising of this period attest, saintliness implies engagement in the world with an eye on that to come.

### **Ends and intervals**

As Thomas prepares to confront the First Tempter, he becalms a fellow Priest while also subtly breaking the fourth wall:

End will be simple, sudden, God-given.  
Meanwhile the substance of our first act  
Will be shadows, and the strife with shadows.  
Heavier the interval than the consummation. (*CPP*, 246)

Taken out of context, the verses almost read as a terse summary of the play’s structure. Following the blueprint of history, there can be no surprises in the ‘God-given’ ‘End’ towards which the action builds. In the ‘first act’, the play will put forth an *agon*, a spiritual struggle. And, keeping in mind that the sermon is designated as ‘Interval’, we are given fair warning that ‘heavier’ subject matter awaits us in Thomas’s address to his congregation. As this chapter has shown, the sermon is constructed around a dense network of theological and philosophical positions. Through Thomas’s unassuming homiletic voice, Eliot asserts the mutual significance of Christ’s birth and death, the primacy of divine grace over human goodwill, and the balance between love for God and love for one’s neighbours.

Given such underlying complexity, it is perhaps appropriate that Harry Irvine, who played Thomas Becket in the 1936 New York production of *Murder in the Cathedral*, complained that he found the sermon difficult. The criticism irked Eliot, who testily wrote in a letter that ‘[i]t is only a sermon...timed to give the effect, in eight or nine minutes, of an



ordinary sermon which would take at least fifteen'.<sup>1</sup> The sermon achieves this. Moreover, as an interval, it offers a moment of reprieve for both the characters and the audience, separating the spiritual conflict in the first act from the physical violence in the second. It also relieves the image-laden dramatic verse in order to approach 'death and martyrdom' (*OPP*, 81) in discursive prose. All this is to say that the sermon serves a dramatic function.

But it also provides a defence against the very questions that the play (and history) raises about the motives of its protagonist. In an admiring review of the play in 1935, Mark van Doren remarked that no one 'can say that Thomas Becket was without spiritual pride when he determined to obey his instinct of martyrdom', 'nor can Thomas's own words to himself be taken as testimony, since he dies a man and not a saint, and speaks accordingly – as one, that is to say, who desires to know rather than knows'.<sup>2</sup> It is to the dramatic credit of Eliot's play, as Van Doren's review suggests, that we are never entirely convinced about the purity of Thomas's motives. And it is to Eliot's personal credit that, against his brother's accusations of humbug, the sermon pre-emptively bears witness to his consistency of thought and firmness of belief.

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished letter to Henry Eliot on 28 April, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> In Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 326-327.

## Chapter 4

### A defence of wretchedness: *Molloy* and humiliation

In July, 1946, *Les Temps modernes* published part of Beckett's short story, 'Suite'. Simone de Beauvoir had not understood, nor did she particularly care, that the piece was incomplete or that its author expected the concluding segment to appear in the review's next installment. Naturally, Beckett was anguished by her refusal to let the story – later to be called 'La Fin' ('The End') – come to an end.

You are giving me the chance to speak only to retract it before the words have had time to mean anything. You are immobilising an existence at the very moment at which it is about to take its definitive form. There is something nightmarish about that. I find it hard to believe that matters of presentation can justify, in the eyes of the author of *L'Invitée*, such a mutilation.

Your view is that the fragment which appeared in your last number is a finished piece. That is not my view. I see it as no more than a major premise.

Do not be offended by this plain speaking. It is without rancour. It is simply that there exists a wretchedness which must be defended to the very end, in one's own work and outside it. (*L2*, 42)

The situation was humiliating for reasons additional to the compromise of artistic integrity. Beauvoir believed Beckett's attempt to submit further writing under the same title to be an act of deception, a ploy to secure publication in two consecutive issues and earn a greater fee than had initially been agreed. She also thought, as Knowlson points out, that the abounding scatology in the second part was unsuitable for the review.<sup>1</sup> Careful and deferential, the tone of Beckett's letter attests to an awareness of his awkward position: an *inconnu* on the French literary scene ('Suite' was his first work in French) who had now made a potentially

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<sup>1</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 359. For a comprehensive account of the publishing history around 'Suite' and 'The End', see Dirk van Hulle, 'Publishing "The End": Beckett and *Les Temps modernes*', in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: The British Library, 2011), 73-82.

damaging professional blunder. And yet he does not seek to redress the miscommunication or to save face but instead pleads for the character of the story who has been ‘denied his rest’.

The task of defending the ‘wretchedness’ in his work was something Beckett had to face throughout his career. He refused, for instance, to capitulate to Houghton Mifflin’s demands for major cuts to *Murphy* (L1, 183). He fought against the Lord Chamberlain’s insistence that *Endgame*’s infamous line, ‘The bastard! He doesn’t exist!’, be excised or replaced (L3, 81). And when *New World Writing* published a ‘horrible montage’ from *Molloy* without indicating that the text was not continuous, he expressed his annoyance in a letter to Barney Rosset: ‘The excerpt is always unsatisfactory, but let it at least be continuous. I don’t mind how short it is, or with how little beginning or end, but I refuse to be short-circuited like an ulcerous gut’ (L2, 432).

These examples are not exhaustive, but they serve to reveal the opposing desires of the author and of the publishers (and censors). The two principal considerations that appear to compel editorial alterations are narrative cohesion and the moderation of obscenity. For Beckett, however, streamlining and sanitization were not processes distinct from each other. Given the anxious conclusion to ‘The End’, the rest which Beckett felt his ‘creature’ had been denied was not merely a question of narrative resolution. The rest also inhered in those debasing and indecent elements to which Beauvoir had objected. Bodily functions and dysfunctions – what the narrator of *How It Is* calls the ‘great categories of being’ (HIII, 9) – are part of what gives Beckett’s work its ‘definitive form’.

His famous reflection on Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, ‘Here form *is* content, content *is* form’ (Dis, 27), has justifiably been applied to his own work: Beckett’s words falter because the sense is faltering. This is not a new idea. Beckett’s art, by his own pronouncement, is concerned with failure. ‘The kind of work I do,’ he explained,

is one in which I’m not master of my material.... I’m working with impotence, ignorance. I don’t think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a

kind esthetic axiom that expression is achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as some-thing unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this revelation, there was a time when Beckett was not Beckettian. This was before his realisation that the ‘way [of his art] was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding’, before the broken epiphany dramatized in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (see *CDW*, 220).<sup>2</sup> This was also the time before Beckett’s widespread fame, before critical and public opinion marked him as an artist whose concern, both in form and content, was weakness. Beauvoir’s decision falls within this period. And leaving aside questions of taste and personal disgruntlement, her failure to appreciate how essential infirmities and humiliations are to ‘Suite’ may be explained as a failure to appreciate the Beckettian ‘agenda’.

Today the opposite complication may be identified: the Beckettian agenda is perhaps too well appreciated. This is to say that critical interpretations have identified coherence where previously there was dehiscence or distinction. One example is the collective title often applied when speaking of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*: the ‘Trilogy’. Use of this term is a sin committed against the author’s wishes and one committed, for the largest part, unwittingly. The third volume of letters, published in 2014, witnesses Beckett’s strong opposition to this handle by which to grab three separate bundles. Though he was pleased about John Calder’s decision to publish the three works together (*L3*, 187), he could not propose a general title and was against Calder’s suggestion, ‘Trinity’: ‘It seems to me the three titles should be enough.’ A month later, in a tone of greater desperation, he dismissed his publisher’s next proposal: ‘Not “Trilogy”, I beseech you, just the three titles and nothing

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<sup>1</sup> Israel Shenker, ‘Interview with Beckett’, in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge, 2005), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 352.

else' (L3, 191). And as the publication date of the 'three in one' was approaching, Beckett expressed the same apprehension to Barbara Bray about Calder's potential editorial choice: 'Please God he doesn't call it a trilogy' (L3, 222).

The 1959 publication was titled *Three Novels* and not 'Trilogy' – not, at least, until the Picador reprint of 1975 yoked the works together under the title, *The Beckett Trilogy*.<sup>1</sup> But to lay the blame solely at Calder's feet is to overlook that *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* are generally regarded as having more in common than just a single binding. Use of the term 'trilogy' is pervasive in Beckett studies. V. S. Pritchett – one of *Three Novels*'s earliest reviewers – refers to the book as a 'Trilogy' in the opening sentence of his review.<sup>2</sup> Since then critics as eminent as Hugh Kenner, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom have all applied it to these postwar novels. Even Christopher Ricks, who takes critics to task for curtailing 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to just its eponym, uses this substitutive word.<sup>3</sup> In a recent issue of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* which 'revisits' the three novels, five contributors use 'Trilogy' in the titles of their respective articles.<sup>4</sup>

This terse survey is not intended to point to lapses in critical practice. Rather, it is to indicate how the similarity of philosophical and aesthetic landscapes across Beckett's 'three novels' has shaped its subsequent cartography. Ackerley and Gontarski argue that "'trilogy" or not, the three novels...form a cohesive and extended exploration of the imaginative consciousness'.<sup>5</sup> This is undeniable. The question is where the cohesion begins and ends, and where the borders are to be drawn. Beckett himself saw *Molloy* as the 'second last of the series begun with *Murphy*, if it can be said to be a series', and the stories that became *Texts for Nothing* as the 'afterbirth of *L'Innommable*' (L2, 71, 300). This is not to suggest that

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter D. McDonald, 'Calder's Beckett', in Nixon, *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, 153-170.

<sup>2</sup> In Graver and Federman, *The Critical Heritage*, 216-219.

<sup>3</sup> Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, 112, 116.

<sup>4</sup> See David Tucker, Mark Nixon, and Dirk van Hulle, eds., *Revisiting Molloy, Malone meurt / Malone Dies and L'Innommable / The Unnamable* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Faber Companion*, 586.

critics have failed to explore the commonalities that extend from *Murphy* to *Texts for Nothing* or even beyond. After all, Beckett himself provided Geulincx and Democritus as obscure keys to the obscure locks of his work (*L2*, 427, 669). But thinking of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* as a trilogy or even as three works more intimately related than any other series of works in the Beckett canon (except perhaps *Nohow On*), forgetting that three separate texts are collected not because of authorial design but because of publishing savvy, creates a problem not too dissimilar from the one identified in Beauvoir's 'mutilation' of 'Suite'.

My concern here is not with an exclusionary effect, with the fact that the 'series' Beckett conceived is amputated at both ends or that other products of the 'siege in the room' (*Quatres Nouvelles*, *Mercier et Camier*, and *En Attendant Godot*) are – by dint of the definition of 'trilogy' – disallowed to push this particular triangulation into a larger framework. My concern, rather, is with a surplus of correspondence that is created among these three works, with the possibility that this hyper-connection could lead to the *mobilization* of an existence beyond its definitive form. As early as 1929, Beckett warned that for criticism the 'danger is in the neatness of identification' (*Dis*, 19). But it is a danger that his works court through what appears to be their cohesive though amorphous quality. 'The amoeba's neck', Beckett remarked in reference to the prospect of cutting *Murphy*, 'is not easily broken' (*L1*, 383). If omission in Beckett is a violation that deprives characters of a necessary stasis, over-identification beyond the distinct borders of texts might amount to the same thing.

### **Humiliating associations and effacements**

An equivalent over-identification emerges in *Molloy*. The two principal characters, Molloy and Moran, share in a strange resemblance. So uncanny is their likeness that *The Faber*

*Companion to Samuel Beckett* lists twenty-one similarities between them. The correspondence goes deep enough for the editors to claim not just kinship but a kind of vanishing twin syndrome:

It is not so much that Moran has become Molloy, or that the second half should precede the first, but that Molloy was always part of Moran, as were Gaber and Youdi, agents of a superego.... What the Moran section offers, and why it follows the Molloy section (and why the novel is called *Molloy*, not *Moran*), is a fiction written by Molloy of Molloy as Moran encountering Molloy.<sup>1</sup>

This theory may account for the abrupt change in perspective at the end of the novel where Moran is replaced as the first-person narrator; it may also suggest what Molloy's writing contains. But it perpetrates the same kind of permeability that use of the term 'trilogy' allows, and fails to appreciate the novel's 'definitive form' that realises itself not only in parallels but also in differences.

It is telling that towards the end of the novel – the point at which Moran most closely shadows Molloy – the former reflects on the divergence that may be found in ostensible similarities. Studying the dance of his bees, he remarks:

I first concluded that each figure [of the dance] was reinforced by means of a hum peculiar to it. But I was forced to abandon this agreeable hypothesis. For I saw the same figure (at least what I called the same figure) accompanied by very different hums. So that I said, The purpose of the hum is not to emphasize the dance, but on the contrary to vary it. And the same figure exactly differs in meaning according to the hum that goes with it.... But there was to be considered not only the figure and the hum, but also the height at which the figure was executed. And I acquired the conviction that the selfsame figure, accompanied by the selfsame hum, did not mean at all the same thing at twelve feet from the ground as it did at six. (*TN*, 163-164)

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<sup>1</sup> Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Faber Companion*, 378.

Moran admits that he could be wrong, that the dance could be as pointless as the ‘dances of the people of the West’. But he is content not to subject the phenomenon to his ‘cogitations’ and refuses to conceive of the bees as creatures constituted by his understanding: ‘I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body.’ Where previously Moran is fastidious, authoritarian, and partial to the symmetries of accounting, he now resists the temptation to calibrate the world in familiar terms: ‘I could no longer be bothered with these wretched trifles which had once been my delight’ (155). He does not achieve the ‘ataraxy’ of Molloy, since his mind remains ‘avid...of the flimsiest analogy’. But he is ready to concede the unassimilable otherness of his bees and of God. Moran’s comment on the latter relationship throws his newfound negative capability and former audacity into relief. Early in the narrative his church-going is established as self-serving and self-centred, a ritual that helps to ‘buck [him] up’ (90). The above statement declares this in its reversal of Genesis 1:26 (‘Let us make man in our image’), but also undoes it: Moran now recognizes the ‘wrong’ inherent in a subject-defined, Cartesian-inflected (‘cogitations’) interpretation of external reality.

The passage signals both Moran’s metamorphosis and an ethical encouragement to resist the homogenisation of alterity. The two things cannot be divorced, since it is at this point that Moran – sharing so many of Molloy’s traumas and infirmities, ‘becoming rapidly unrecognizable’ (164) – has the most lucid grasp of himself. As the different heights, hums and figures of the bees remain beyond exact definition, so too does the exact relation between Molloy and Moran. Beckett brings Moran to the precipice of a humiliating effacement, blurring but not merging his being with Molloy’s. This does not, however, preclude our *reading* Moran out of existence. In an interpretation like that in the *Faber Companion*, the character suffers a dispossession of self not only within the text but also from outside: having been stripped of health, possessions and his familial relations, Moran is also stripped of the



subjectivity which these losses ultimately constitute. Like *The Double*'s Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, Moran faces erasure in the presence of his doppelganger. But where this erasure is operational in Dostoevsky's novel, it is only a suspended potentiality in Beckett's. The text offers an interpretive choice: to *inscribe* Moran within the consciousness of Molloy and thus to *unwrite* Moran, or to preserve Moran's otherness in following the ethical imperative implicit in the bee passage.

Conflicting responses to alterity are also explored in some of Beckett's other works. In *Company*, for instance, the narrator reflects on his past actions and their consequences (*Com etc.*, 18-19). He remembers taking 'pity on a hedgehog out in the cold', placing it in a hatbox, supplying it with worms, and feeling warmly triumphal about his humane efforts. He further recalls that the 'glow' was replaced by 'uneasiness' when doubts over his intervention started crowding in; a debilitating guilt delays his return to the hatbox by weeks. When he eventually faces the scene of his charity he is met by a 'mush' and 'stench' that will plague his memory thereafter. Laura Salisbury sees the text as an 'articulation of the ethical that refuses an ethics of knowledge or judgement which might turn otherness into an object of understanding for the self. It should be thought of as part of a historical moment that reads ethical anxiety and representational crisis as strikingly imbricated.'<sup>1</sup> The difference between the bee passage in *Molloy* and the hedgehog passage in *Company* comes down to the difference between contemplative and instrumental reason, which is why Salisbury interprets the later text as an oblique and knotted question about post-Holocaust engagement. But *Molloy* is also a post-Holocaust text. And while it does not explore the problematic ethics of acting on behalf of another to the same extent, it does present the danger of absorbing individual narratives into larger ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 171.

Directly after pondering the otherness of his bees, Moran reflects on himself with uncertain certainty:

And to tell the truth I not only knew who I was, but I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before, in spite of its deep lesions and the wounds with which it was covered. And from this point of view I was less fortunate than my other acquaintances. I am sorry if this last phrase is not so happy as it might be. It deserved, who knows, to be without ambiguity. (*TN*, 164)

The passage is complex because it accommodates the anguish of self-knowledge and a tacit anxiety about its opposite. Moran regards his clear sense of identity as a source of misfortune, a painful awareness that does not afflict his ‘other acquaintances’. In their turn, these blessed others would seem to be fading from selfhood. Whether this is due to a collective, swallowing identity (the very thing which menaces Moran in his proximity to Molloy) or to other factors is not known. What is of importance and what can be mapped, if only conditionally, is Moran’s understanding of the self *as* self.

If the ‘[un]happy phrase’ comprises the whole preceding sentence, its content and possible meanings can only be defined in terms of the first sentence where Moran’s ‘point of view’ finds expression. But taking him at his word for the time being, the last phrase (‘my other acquaintances’) betrays a peculiar element of his self-conception. No ‘acquaintance’ is mentioned in this paragraph, so one cannot read the phrase as a differentiation between one particular acquaintance and other unidentified ones. The word ‘other’ appears to mark Moran himself, or a version of himself, as one among his familiars. In other words, his sense of identity is contingent on an apperceptive process in which subjectivity becomes objectified: a fault line surfaces between ‘I’ and ‘me’. Moran, then, becomes an object of his consciousness to the same extent that his acquaintances are objects of his consciousness. And while it may be that he has a clearer understanding of himself (than ‘ever before’, but also than of his acquaintances), it results from within a splintered and self-estranged subjectivity.

In the same paragraph we read: ‘it seemed to me I was now becoming rapidly unrecognizable’; ‘the face my hands felt was not my face anymore’; ‘this belly I did not know remained my belly’. This might appear fertile ground for reclaiming Beckett as a Cartesian dualist, but that would be to miss the point which Moran himself misses or can only grasp in ambiguous terms: just as his physical features have suffered a sea change, so too has his ego.<sup>1</sup> Moran’s subtle transition between reflection on the physical and reflection on the mental does, however, suggest his awareness of a metamorphic continuum. He does not separate his observations on body and mind with a dividing ‘but’; rather, he glissades between the two with ‘And’.

It should already be clear that part of the ‘unhappiness’ in the phrase ‘my other acquaintances’ is its tentacular, uncontained ambiguity. This is really stating a tautology, but also that ‘last phrase’ is a vague indicator in itself. To find possible explanations for Moran’s idea that he is ‘less fortunate’ than his ‘other acquaintances’ demands considering the sentence in which his ‘point of view’ is articulated and what, from that point of view, would make him less fortunate. Here, two possible meanings are kept in tension, which I will explore in some detail. One: Moran is less fortunate from the point of view that he has a clear sense of identity or, to state it inversely, his acquaintances are more fortunate in not having a clear sense of identity. Two: he is less fortunate from the point of view that he has a clear sense of identity *in spite* of the injuries that attend his identity: that is, the lesions and wounds have not had the fortunate identity-obscuring effect they may have had on his acquaintances. Moran thus remains fully conscious of himself and – since there is a self-identifying subject to experience them – his sufferings.

The first meaning may seem an odd way of regarding self-knowledge: surely a clear sense of identity is a good thing? Good, perhaps; fortunate, no. Throughout his life Beckett

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Feldman’s *Beckett’s Books: A Cultural History of the Interwar Notes* (London: Continuum, 2006) debunks the Kenner-inspired interpretations of Beckett as a Cartesian.

was drawn to authors in whose writing a deprecating conception of self is advocated: certain pre-Socratics, numerous mystics, Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, Blaise Pascal, Arnold Geulincx, Arthur Schopenhauer, Emil Cioran, and many others. In most of these cases, negative self-regard is rooted in an ontology of fallenness: the individual who truly knows himself also knows the true and eternal condition of humanity. For Bernard of Clairvaux, ‘Humility is a virtue by which a man has a low opinion of himself because he knows himself well’.<sup>1</sup> Thomas à Kempis writes that ‘He who knoweth himself well is vile in his own sight’.<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Taylor considered humility to consist not in an external display of wretchedness, but ‘in hearty and real evil or mean opinion of thyself’.<sup>3</sup> And Pascal believed that ‘Man’s greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness’.<sup>4</sup>

That Beckett himself also regarded human existence as constituted by an ontological humiliation is witnessed in many of his writings. In *Proust* he reflects on the ‘sin of having been born’ (*PTD*, 67). In his reading of Windelband’s *History of Philosophy*, he notes Anaximander’s ‘doctrine that things must perish as an expiation for injustice’ and that it ‘presents the first dim attempt to conceive the cosmic process as ethical necessity and the shadows of transitoriness[...]as retribution for sin’.<sup>5</sup> A comparable idea finds expression in *Murphy* (43), this time through a reference to Bildad the Shuhite’s mocking question, ‘How can he be clean that is born of a woman?’ (Job 24:4). *Watt*’s ‘Addenda’ include an enigmatic Latin phrase about being born ‘polluted’ (233). In *Malone Dies* (*TN*, 233), Macmann feels, without knowing his ‘sin’, that ‘living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living’. In *The Unnamable* (*TN*, 304), the moment of existence is

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, trans. M. Ambrose Conway (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas à Kempis. *The Imitation of Christ*, 214.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *Holy Living*, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi; ed., intro., and annotated by Anthony Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 136.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Philosophy Notes’, TCD MS 10967/7.1, Trinity College Dublin.

seen as coinciding with punishment: 'I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I've forgotten what it is.' And *A Piece of Monologue* (CDW, 425) opens with the postnatal-knell: 'Birth was the death of him.'

Since Geulincx is directly invoked in *Molloy*, his imperatives of self-inspection and self-disregard are most pertinent in the case of Moran's unhappy existence. It is well-known that the *Ethics* of the seventeenth-century philosopher had a major shaping influence on Beckett's creative output. In particular, Geulincx's 'axiom of morals' – '*ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*' – has resonances throughout Beckett's work:

*Wherein you have no power, therein neither should you will....* Note that this axiom includes both parts of humility...inspection and disregard. *Wherein you have no power*; we read in this the inspection of oneself...*Therein you should not will*; we read in this...disregard of oneself, or neglect of oneself across the whole human condition, and resigning ourselves into the power of His hand, in which we are, indeed, whether we like it or not.... Therefore, to will nothing concerning our condition, to leave the whole thing to Him in whose power it really is, this truly is to disregard oneself, this is to build virtue on the unshakable foundation of humility.<sup>1</sup>

In this regard, self-knowledge may well be seen as a source of misfortune. Inspection of oneself leads to a realisation of powerlessness; disregard of oneself necessitates a resignation of will because of that powerlessness. But if there is no potential to begin with, it is difficult to see how the will can come into play. *Molloy*'s single explicit reference to Geulincx suggests that, although there is some room for wilful ignorance, the conditions of existence are not altered by what one chooses to believe or not to believe:

I who had loved the image of old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. That is a great measure of freedom, for him who has not the pioneering spirit. And from the poop,

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<sup>1</sup> Geulincx, *Ethics*, 337.

poring upon the wave, a sadly rejoicing slave, I follow with my eyes the proud and futile wake. Which, as it bears me from no fatherland away, bears me onward to no shipwreck. (*TN*, 46)

The passage implies Geulincx's axiom of morals and, with its nautical metaphor, directly alludes to an image from the *Ethics* which illustrates the futility of our resistance to divine will: 'Just as a ship carrying a passenger with all speed towards the west in no way prevents the passenger from walking towards the east, so the will of God, carrying all things, impelling all things with inexorable force, in no way prevents us from resisting his will.'<sup>1</sup> But in his cross-stitching of the *Ethics* and *Inferno* 26, Molloy buys into neither Geulingian predestination nor Dantean ordination. And, as his sardonic tone suggests, neither does he glimpse anything more than momentary escape. Beckett's palimpsest of the transcendently directed vessel and its cosmologically ill-fated counterpart creates a context in which all individual effort is rendered futile: both that of Geulincx's east-facing rebel and of the intrepid Ulysses who is damned by Dante for pride. Molloy sees himself as a slave, a being with no rights, no status, and no worth. But he also recognizes that these privations were never anything but privations. No home has been lost since there never was a home; no security can be shattered since there was none to begin with.

Beckett's manipulation of *Inferno* 26 in this final sentence significantly rewrites the fate of Dante's Ulysses, whose account of his voyage opens with reference to his family and concludes with a divinely-ordained tempest. What spurs on the Dantean Ulysses to forsake his familial duties and to tempt fate is a desire for enlightenment. Encouraging his followers, he says:

Bethink you of the seed  
whence ye have sprung,  
for ye were not created

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<sup>1</sup> Geulincx, *Ethics*, 317.

to lead the life of stupid animals,  
but manliness and knowledge to pursue.<sup>1</sup>

But Molloy admits to having killed the ‘Aegean’ (that is, Ulysses) in himself who craved ‘heat and light’ (*TN*, 25).<sup>2</sup> He is of the same ilk as the Unnamable, who sees no common ground between himself and that other figure of humanist striving, Prometheus (*TN*, 297): ‘between me and that miscreant who mocked the gods, invented fire, denatured clay and domesticated the horse, in a word obliged humanity, I trust there is nothing in common.’ Molloy’s odyssey, then, has neither foundation (whether in the guise of privilege, destiny, or duty) nor a knowable *telos* (whether in the attainment of Ulysses’ aims or in his destruction); his ‘calvary...[has] no limits to its stations and no hope of crucifixion’ (*TN*, 73). Humiliation, to twist Eliot’s line, is endless.

Molloy’s ‘sad rejoicing’ thus emerges as an awareness of what Beckett called an ‘ontological indecency’.<sup>3</sup> The sadness emanates from the state of powerless itself; the rejoicing is a payoff for recognising this unchanging truth. The terms, though opposite, are not equal. If Molloy were a rejoicingly sad slave, he would be a being without worth who takes pleasure in his worthlessness, a masochist.<sup>4</sup> But because the rejoicing is located in an epistemic certainty of humiliation it remains in the shadow of ontological despair. In this respect Moran’s ‘less fortunate’ position seems to correspond. The ambiguity of his utterance, to consider another possible grey area, colours the very terms ‘less fortunate’. If

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Inf.* 26.118-120.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter of 17 February 1954, Beckett explained his conjunction of Geulincx and Dante: ‘I imagine a member of the crew who does not share the adventurous spirit of Ulysses and is at least at liberty to crawl homewards...along the brief deck’ (*L2*, 458). For another discussion of Geulincx in *Molloy*, see David Tucker, *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx: Tracing ‘a Literary Fantasia’* (London: Continuum, 2012), 119-122.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Russell’s discussion of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* provides a suggestive analogy: ‘The emphasis on true humiliation as true humility is a doctrinal commitment which should not be translated into any psychological category of masochism as a physical or psychic eros.’ Russell, ‘Beyond the will: Humiliation as Christian necessity in *Crime and Punishment*’, in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226.

Moran is less fortunate than his acquaintances because knowledge of his being issues in despair, he may at the same time be more fortunate in following the Delphic imperative to ‘know thyself’, which, in its turn, occasions despair, and so on. (A comparable ouroboros of catastrophe and blessing emerges when Malone loses his stick and can consider its ‘thatness’ or essence, ‘shorn of all accidents’ [TN, 201]. A still more pertinent example of this ambivalence is found in his claim that ‘I would willingly attribute part of my shall I say misfortunes to this disordered sense were I not unfortunately rather inclined to look upon it as a blessing. Misfortunes, blessings, I have no time to pick my words, I am in a hurry to be done’ [TN, 201]).

The very last passage Beckett copied from Geulincx’s *Ethics* centres on this Janus-faced kind of happiness: ‘A truly humble mind, having not only submitted to, but immersed itself in its Obligations...*beyond concern*...is capable of Happiness.’<sup>1</sup> Such happiness – such humility – is a sad rejoicing. It is born from ‘obligations’ that necessitate the recognition of an abased condition as well as the practice of self-abasement; it entails, in Arsene’s words to Watt, opening oneself up ‘to the long joys of being [oneself], like a basin to vomit’ (W, 33).<sup>2</sup> And in Wayne Koestenbaum’s formulation: ‘[h]umiliation isn’t merely the basement of a personality, or the scum pile of the stairway down. Humiliation is the *earlier event* that paves the way for “self” to know it exists.’<sup>3</sup> The reflection takes its cue from *Molloy* (10): ‘deep down is my dwelling, oh not deepest down, somewhere between the mud and the scum.’ The point is that such happiness (sad rejoicing or humility), dragged into the ‘eudemonistic slop’

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<sup>1</sup> Geulincx, *Ethics*, 353, my italics. Beckett (LI, 319) himself makes a reference to Janus in explaining his reasons for reading Geulincx in 1936: ‘the work [is] worth doing, because of its saturation in the conviction that the sub specie aeternitatis vision is the only excuse for remaining alive. He does not put out his eyes on that account, as Heraclitus did & Rimbaud began to, nor like the terrified Berkeley repudiate them. One feels them very patiently turned outward, & without Schwärmerei turned in-ward, Janus or Telephus eyes, like those of Frenhofer in the Chef d’Oeuvre Inconnu, when he shall have forgotten Mabuse & ceased to barbouiller.’

<sup>2</sup> Beckett’s image and conception of the self bears comparison with that of Jeremy Taylor: ‘Our body is weak and impure, sending out more uncleannesses from its several sinks than could be endured, if they were not necessary and natural; and we are forced to pass that through our mouths, which as soon as we see upon the ground, we loathe like rottenness and vomiting.’ Taylor, *Holy Living*, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Koestenbaum, *Humiliation*, 20.



(TN, 50), cannot result in a sense of superiority: unlike Socrates who is the wisest man because he appreciates his lack of wisdom, Moran cannot inflect his identity with any superlatives. Rather, he somewhat resembles Kierkegaard's Abraham, who is 'great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself'.<sup>1</sup>

There is, of course, a second possible meaning in Moran's point of view, which intimates that his acquaintances are relieved of identity through their suffering. The key words, here, are 'in spite': they suggest that Moran's heightened sense of self comes as a surprise in light of its 'lesions and...wounds', that he would expect these afflictions to have an erosive rather than solidifying effect. Again, it is pointless to speculate about the unidentified others; one cannot claim that their pains and tortures – if pains and tortures there be – have carried them mystically beyond themselves. But what Moran does disclose is a temporal marker: his identity is clearer than 'ever before'. The moment of self-realisation coincides with the moment of greatest suffering. It is significant that these injuries are not physical though they are conceived in the language of bodily pain (which intimates that physical suffering may well occasion a deepened self-understanding). It is also significant that the injuries do not manifest only as part of Moran's new and self-estranged appearance: they belong to his identity itself and are part of its make-up. So another possible meaning is kept alive in the ambiguous point of view: Moran is surer of himself not *in spite* of the lesions and wounds but *because* of them. It is a causality suggestively glossed by The Unnamable: '[M]utilate, mutilate, and perhaps some day, fifteen generations hence, you'll succeed in beginning to look like yourself' (TN, 309).

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 12.

That suffering provides access to a truer identity is a theory Beckett propounds in *Proust* (*PTD*, 18-21). Habit and boredom are condemned as enemies of reality because they instil a fallacious belief in the subject as self-consistent. The ‘suffering of being’, on the other hand, ‘opens a window on the Real’. Where habit seeks to create the semblance of continuity between splintered selves, suffering allows ‘perilous...dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile [zones]’ to come into focus. At such moments, the subject comes face to face with the division and deformity that result from its temporal existence:

There is no escape from the hours and the days. Neither from to-morrow nor from yesterday. There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us. The mood is of no importance. Deformation has taken place. Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. (*PTD*, 11-12)

The idea also occurs in *Watt*:

Yes, these moments together have changed us, your moments and my moments, so that we are not only no longer the same now as when they began – ticktick! ticktick! – to elapse, but we know that we are no longer the same, and not only know that we are no longer the same, but know in what we are no longer the same, you wiser but not sadder, and I sadder but not wiser, for wiser I could hardly become without grave personal inconvenience, whereas sorrow is a thing you can keep on adding to all your life long, is it not, like a stamp or egg collection, without feeling very much the worse for it, is it not. (*W*, 41)

The suffering of being or, as Shane Weller calls it, ‘the suffering of ever-less-than-being’, has both advantages and disadvantages.<sup>1</sup> The ego undergoes a necessary loss of security when confronted with self-estrangement and ‘opposed by a phenomenon that it cannot reduce to the condition of a comfortable and familiar concept’ (*PTD*, 21). This counts

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Weller, *A Taste for Nothing: Beckett and Nihilism* (London: Legenda, 2005), 4.

as an advantage since it makes self-knowledge possible. But the moment during which the victim of time and habit becomes an 'ex-victim' is also subject to flux. The self-realisation brought about in the suffering of being disappears 'with a wailing and gnashing of teeth. The mortal microcosm cannot forgive the relative immortality of the macrocosm' (21). Understood in terms of our earlier discussion, the 'immortal macrocosm' may be seen as a condition unchanged and unchanging. The 'mortal microcosm' is the individual's world of experience in which knowledge of the macrocosm is enabled by suffering but simultaneously deformed and distorted by time. Moran shows some awareness of the interminable nature of degradation:

I forged my way through [the snow], towards what I would have called my ruin if I could have conceived what I had left to be ruined. Perhaps I have conceived it since, perhaps I have not done conceiving it, it takes time, one is bound to in time, I am bound to. But on the way home, a prey to the malignancy of man and nature and my own failing flesh, I could not conceive it. (160)

Ultimately, there is no Archimedean point from which the subject can fully know his being. Knowledge of one's being remains anchored in time and change (or, in Eliot's words: 'The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies, / For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been' [*PTSEI*, 187]). Here resides the tension between the vicissitudes of a cruel existence and the essential character of that existence. As with the purgatory Beckett identifies in Joyce's work, there is no culmination, no progress, and no absolute (*Dis*, 30). There can be a groping 'worstward', a *becoming* humiliated, but never a finally humiliated *being*.

Moran's self-assessment, then, is not wilfully ambivalent but unavoidably so. The ambiguity of his reflection is a product of his powerlessness. He embodies Fernando Pessoa's beautiful formulation of the impossibility of complete self-knowledge: 'We are two abysses –

a well staring at the sky.<sup>1</sup> But that same ambiguity is also testament to a momentary humility in which Moran does not irritably reach after fact or reason even though realising his insight ‘deserves’ to be unambiguous. The passage represents an instant in which powerlessness is accepted and his own untranslatable hums are left untouched by instrumental reason.

### **‘Tears and laughter’: Responding to humiliation**

In *A Short History of Decay*, Emil Cioran says that misery

constitutes the texture of all that breathes; but its modalities have changed course; they have composed that series of irreducible appearances which lead each of us to believe he is the first to have suffered so. The pride of such uniqueness incites us to cherish our own pain and to endure it. In a world of sufferings, each of them is a solipsist in relation to all the rest. Misery’s originality is due to the verbal quality which isolates it in the sum of words and sensations.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not Beckett had read these words before writing *Molloy*, his novel nonetheless achieves something of their astuteness.<sup>3</sup> What differentiates the two central characters in the end is not their suffering, hardly distinguishable in paraphrase, but their respective responses to suffering. If we briefly consider the concluding moments of the first part, it is clear that Molloy resists all stasis and comfort. At the nadir of his infirmity he finds it necessary to continue on a quest which is as much a search for his mother as it is an inexhaustible self-examination. Though an opportunity for capitulation presents itself in the forest, Molloy finds an ‘access of vigour’ (*TN*, 79) in his ‘weakness’, and this allows him to realise the Beckettian ethos of ‘going on’ despite insurmountable obstacles. Molloy is aware that no net-gain is to be hoped for, that a change of location will not mean progress. Still he allows his imperatives

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 20.

<sup>2</sup> E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 20.

<sup>3</sup> In a letter of 1956, Beckett (*L2*, 678) expresses his wish to reread *Précis de décomposition*, first published in 1949.

to wrench him from situations where, ‘if all was not well, all was no worse than anywhere else’ (80). Still he ‘submits’ to this ineffable force though it leaves him in ever greater doubt.

By contrast, Moran’s self-insight flickers without flaming into that ‘burning illogicality’ and stoic uncertainty Beckett admired in St John of the Cross and other mystics.<sup>1</sup> Like the self-centred sufferer described by Cioran, Moran’s egotism returns to replace the apparent surrender of a moment before. Afflictions, fulfilling an earlier Freudian slip (‘I was succumbing to other affections, that is not the word, intestinal for the most part’ [160]), become affections; asceticism assumes the aspect of perverse delight. (This is far off from Simone Weil’s understanding of affliction as a ‘state of extreme and total humiliation’ in which pride and self-reliance are utterly voided).<sup>2</sup> Abandoning himself to the frailties of his flesh and the cruelty of the weather, he weds fresh destitution to former joys. His passion for enumeration sparks briefly in the ways his threadbare shirt can be worn; the umbrella/walking stick dilemma recalls his delight in linear logic, which trumps the primacy of bodily needs; and he prefers elemental exposure to facing a reminder of his son (or his son’s raincoat) which would be brought about by building a real shelter (165-166). In short, there is a re-crystallisation of preferences and prerogatives which causes the Geulingian axiom to gradually lose its grip on Moran. He goes too far in the direction of *despicio sui* that he oversteps what may be taken as healthy self-disregard. ‘Humility’, Geulincx warns, ‘does not require anyone positively to despise himself, to defame himself, scourge himself, or treat himself badly in some way or other.’<sup>3</sup>

Even amid his suffering, Moran rediscovers a sense of superiority: ‘The thought of turning for help to the villages, to the peasants, would have displeased me, if it had occurred to me’ (166). Leaving aside the difficulty that the writing is reflection – an act of ‘decomposition’ (21) – the sentence reveals Moran’s contentedness in abjection at the time:

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<sup>1</sup> See Juliet, *Conversations*, 41.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, *An Anthology*, ed. and intro. Siân Miles (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Geulincx, *Ethics*, 29.

the thought of seeking help does not even occur to him, and if it did he would not turn to ‘peasants’, thus sharing in the hauteur of Aristotle’s magnanimous man.<sup>1</sup> Moran has relapsed, more or less fully, into the microcosm where habit and prejudice solidify identity. Because the tensile connection between self-knowledge (a state of humiliation) and acceptance of what it implies (humility) loses its equipoise, Moran’s understanding of himself as ‘less fortunate’ vanishes. Contrasted with Molloy, he stands as a rejoicingly sad slave.

The respective conclusions of Parts I and II, juxtaposed, present a tale of two cries: the ‘publican’s whinge’ and the ‘pharisee’s taratantara’ – terms from Beckett’s 1934 essay, ‘Humanistic Quietism’ (*Dis*, 68), which are apposite to *Molloy*. The essay’s implicit reference to Luke 18:9-14 establishes oppositional attitudes of desperate humility and haughty certainty, of inner compunction and observable righteousness, of self-abasement and self-aggrandisement. It is telling that Moran, caught trespassing on another’s land (*TN*, 167), resorts to an invented religious justification (a pilgrimage to the ‘Turdy Madonna’) to account for his misdemeanour. The lie at once saves his skin and lets him feel superior to the ‘yokel’ he has just duped. In his turn, the pharisee believes himself justified by the law, which is fulfilled in the advent of Christ and therefore no longer the means of redemption. Moran’s ‘[h]umbly ask[ing] a favour’ further extends the hypocrisy. He stands guilty of the ‘pretence of submissiveness’, as La Rochefoucauld calls it – that ‘artifice by which pride debases itself in order to exalt itself; and though it can transform itself in a thousand ways, pride is never better disguised and more deceptive than when it is hidden behind the mask of humility’.<sup>2</sup> Just as the pharisee’s prayer is an affirmation of his superiority over others rather than an acknowledgement of his inferiority before God, Moran’s manipulation is indicative of intellectual pride.

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<sup>1</sup> See Introduction, 12-14.

<sup>2</sup> La Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims*, 73.

But the request, while ensuring that his brains are not knocked out, puts Moran in a position of indebtedness that undermines his cunning victory over the farmer. As evidenced in an earlier episode when an unidentified man asks him for a piece of bread, Moran regards dependency as ‘humiliating’ (140).<sup>1</sup> To tip the scales in his favour he at once withdraws his request and reverses the dynamic by offering the farmer a florin. True to his retrospective resolve, Moran does not turn to a peasant for help. Moreover, he cements the achievement of his falsehood by keeping up appearances at all costs: ‘Above all nothing to eat’, he declares, to show that he is not only a pilgrim but, like the pharisee, one who observes fasting. With satisfaction he reflects on his accomplishment: ‘Moran, wily as a serpent, there was never the like of old Moran’ (168).

This resistance to acts of kindness recalls the attitude of the magnanimous man. Aristotle describes him in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as

the sort of person to do good, but is ashamed to be a beneficiary himself, since doing good is characteristic of a superior, receiving it of an inferior. And he will repay benefits with interest, so that his original benefactor, in addition to being paid, will have become a debtor and a beneficiary.<sup>2</sup>

Moran’s anxiety to avoid debts of kindness offers a caricature of the above. Conceived in Beckett’s own terms, it pays into the ‘quantum of wantum’, the closed circuit in which suffering and happiness remain in constant equilibrium. The idea occurs as early as *Murphy* (36) but is more famously formulated in a speech of Pozzo’s in *Waiting for Godot* (CDW, 33): ‘The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh.’ In *Rough for Theatre I*, however, an equilibrium of charity is threatened when B tucks A’s leg snugly without

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Malone Dies* (TN, 263): ‘I had things to ask him, to give me my stick for example. He would have refused. Then with clasped hands and tears in my eyes I would have begged it of him as a favour. This humiliation has been denied to me thanks to my aphony.’

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 70.

immediately asking a favour in return. Fearful to be indebted indefinitely, A demands to return the kindness (*CDW*, 231): ‘you’re not going to do me a service for nothing? [*Pause*] I mean unconditionally? [*Pause*] Good God!’ It is in this vein – and with comparable pettiness or ‘smallness of soul’ – that Moran wishes to avoid the humiliation of being done a kindness.

But Molloy, in keeping with a more consistent awareness of his weakness, seems more disposed to accept help. Towards the end of his narrative he realises that any further venturing will be rendered impossible without the support of ‘some kind person’ (*TN*, 82). And, not without irony or resignation, he remarks: ‘Well, I suppose you have to try everything once, succour included, to get a complete picture of the resources of their planet’ (85). But there is an obvious instance where Molloy defies the ‘charitable gesture’, which occurs during his detention for what appears to be indecent resting. Approached by a woman he takes to be a social worker, he is repulsed at the sight of her unappetising alms. Running still deeper than his disgust with the ‘tottering pile of disparates’ is his abreaction to unsolicited aid:

Let me tell you this, when social workers offer you, free, gratis and for nothing, something to hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. The Salvation Army is no better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. (19-20)

The passage is significant in light of Beckett’s own charitable endeavours following the war. Volunteering as quartermaster and interpreter for the Irish Red Cross at the small Normandy town of Saint-Lô in 1945, he was witness to a scene of complete devastation. Memories from this time would later be reworked into the fabric of *Endgame*, but Beckett’s most immediate reaction to this experience was an enigmatic and vaguely philosophical



report written for radio broadcast which never aired. The tone of 'The Capital of Ruins' is sober: details of the destruction, hunger and squalor are presented factually rather than emotively. But there are notable instances in which Beckett moves from the journalistic to the moralistic:

What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none, nor the unregarding munificence of the French Ministry of Reconstruction (as it was then called), but the occasional glimpse obtained, by us in them and, who knows, by them in us (for they are an imaginative people), of that smile at the human conditions as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of Borroughes and Welcome, – the smile deriding, among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, the sickness and health. (*CSP*, 277)

Simon Critchley points out the proximity between this 'smile' and Watt's *risus purus* (*W*, 39), and Mercier's belief that nature bids us laugh in the face of suffering (*MC*, 42).<sup>1</sup> For Critchley, it may be classed with the laughter in Beckett's work which so often attends and has unhappiness as its object. The smile, Critchley is careful to point out, is not the cause of unhappiness but rather an indication of the human capacity for greatness in spite of wretchedness, of our ability to recognize our own folly. This Pascalian view, insightful as it is, too triumphantly posits the smile as a response to suffering and sickness. However, the smile (which may well be a grimace for its skeletal, unfeeling rigidity) also cuts across prosperity and good health. It does not only deride the moribund, but falls on all alike: it plagues him that gives and him that takes. Something of this sentiment lies behind the concluding sentences of 'The Capital of Ruins':

But I think that to the end of its hospital days it will be called the Irish Hospital, and after that the huts, when they have been turned into dwellings, the Irish huts. I mention this possibility, in the hope that it will give general satisfaction. And having done so I may perhaps venture to mention another, more remote but perhaps of

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 111.

greater import in certain quarters, I mean the possibility that some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realising that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed they could hardly give, a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. These will have been in France. (*CSP*, 278)

Given the pervasive accounts of Beckett's generosity and sensitivity to the needs of others, the passage should not read as an inveiglement against the Irish effort at Saint- Lô. What it does object to are the feelings of self-satisfaction that attend the charitable gesture. This foreshadows something of the dilemma in *Company*'s hedgehog episode, but it also warns against the creation of a disparity or hierarchy between the haves and the have-nots. Where *Company* recognizes the danger in universally applying a provisional standard of the good, 'The Capital of Ruins' intimates that neither fortune nor misfortune should obscure from view the fact of man's humiliated ontology, the smile that derides each station.

By the light of this short essay, Molloy's violent reaction to the social worker's offering symbolises an effort to resist the stratification of giving and receiving. One should not forget that Molloy is placed within arm's length of the charitable gesture only because he represents a threat to normative conceptions of the good and the beautiful. His arrest and the subsequent treatment he receives, as he rightly reflects, is a result of his disconcerting presence in society, of an awful reminder of humanity in ruins:

What is certain is this, that I never rested in that way again, my feet obscenely resting on the earth, my arms on the handlebars and on my arms my head, rocking and abandoned. It is indeed a deplorable sight, a deplorable example, for the people, who so need to be encouraged, in their bitter toil, and to have before their eyes manifestations of strength only, of courage and of joy, without which they might collapse, at the end of the day, and roll on the ground. (*TN*, 20)

Molloy does not, cannot, like Moran, turn the tables on his benefactors. But the act of shattering the cup and saucer, deliberately and not accidentally, serves as a refusal – however small – to let a vacuous barrier rise up between the needy and the bountiful. To some extent, Molloy realises Beckett's 'dream', not only of an art, but of an existence 'unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving' (*PTD*, 141).

'The End' – the eventual form taken by that story Beauvoir had so uncharitably rejected – also questions the good of goodwill. Pointing a finger at the narrator, who has resorted to begging on the street, a soapbox Marxist interrogates the passers-by: 'Do you ever think?...It never enters your head...that your charity is a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organized murder' (*CSP*, 94). The narrator, however, is unaffected by the display of pious rage. He considers that the orator must either be a religious fanatic or a fugitive madman; in any case, the discourse is 'all Greek to [him]'. It is not only the terms of capitalism and communism that mean nothing to him, but also the idea that charity can be the cause of degradation for those who receive it and a means of elevation for those who bestow it. Like Molloy, he refuses to participate in the vicious differentiation that goodwill might bring about – not obliviously, but because he recognizes that the act of giving is seldom unaccompanied by feelings of superiority. In giving no thanks to those who 'stoop' to give him money, the narrator resists entering into an economy of moral debt and credit. Likewise, Molloy's shattering of the crockery disrupts a circular logic which fails to recognize that the human condition, no matter the particular material or moral station, is common to all, humiliating to all.

In the end Molloy's is only one particular kind of reaction. Transforming the language of 'The End' and admitting that 'tears and laughter' – responses to humiliation and suffering – 'are so much Gaelic to me' (32), he assumes a position of uncertainty which is characteristic of Beckett's aporetic art. By counterbalancing Molloy and Moran, the publican

whinge and the pharisaic tarantara, Beckett does not suggest that all responses to suffering are equally ethical or valid. Rather, what he achieves through the unresolved tensions and opposing perspectives of the novel is an acknowledgement of differences and a defence of wretchedness – in his work and outside it.

## Chapter 5

### Endless humility: self-irony in *East Coker*

In whatever spirit we interpret Eliot's many statements about humility, they yield little in helping us read the poetry as performed humility. The previous chapters of this thesis delineate Eliot's epistemological humility. They are concerned with the intellectual foundations that condition his conscious belief in its importance and broadly locate him within that religious tradition where humility implies knowledge of one's worth in relation to God's perfection. But such knowledge constitutes only one part of the virtue. As Mark Button concisely puts it: 'Humility...is at the relational nexus of both sacrifice (humiliation) and truth.'<sup>1</sup> The current chapter thus alters course by outlining what may be thought of as performed or (drawing currency from Eliot's own words) endless humility, and it explores the ways in which the poetry appears to question its own assumptions and undermine its own importance. To put it in the terms given above, the chapter considers how the *truth* of humility is supplemented by its *sacrifice*.

No such line of inquiry can neglect the second movement of *East Coker* and the particular words that provoke it:

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (*PTSEI*, 188)

The epigrammatic forcefulness of these lines – their emphatic punctuation, their surety of predication – may tempt a reader to catalogue them among other instances of Eliot's sometimes lofty prescriptiveness on the subject of humility.<sup>2</sup> The claim seems a culminating point among more muted intimations of superiority in the poem: a parodic imitation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Button, "'A Monkish Kind of Virtue'?", 260.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *CP3*, 77 and *CP4*, 228.

early Yeats that belies the boast that ‘there is no competition’ (191); an arch meta-discursiveness expressing disenchantment not just with certain poetic modes but with poetry itself (187); the railing against the deceit of old men. Inclining to a kinder interpretation, however, Christopher Ricks writes that these lines resist the status of ‘proud apothegm’ by not having the ‘last word’.<sup>1</sup> They cede the ring of finality to the vanishing houses and dancers that round off the movement, thus becoming less than an ending and also less than an end.

At home in a work that dwells on the contact between beginnings and ends, the lines also recall Eliot’s early philosophical insight that any infinite, endless goal implies a contradiction of terms. In the graduate essay on Kant discussed in Chapter 3, Eliot remarked that ‘if a goal is never to be reached, it is not a goal at all.... [T]he “infinite goal” is reduced to a means’ (*CPI*, 55). The goal in that case was holiness, but the formulation applies equally well to humility. Stripped of teleological designs, the virtue becomes a modality, a way of being that persists unrelieved by the prospect of attainment. The idea is of sound theological provenance. For Martin Luther, humility can never know itself as such without transforming into pride – a result predicated on eventual stasis and satisfaction, and thus not endless.<sup>2</sup> For Gabriel Marcel, Eliot’s contemporary, it can remain intact only so long as it is not regarded as a ‘possession’.<sup>3</sup> (Such an understanding illuminates the irony behind humility as *acquired* wisdom). And the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* – from whose chapter on ‘a stirring to meekness’ Eliot directly quotes in *Little Gidding* (*PTSEI*, 208) – asserts that human efforts at humility (‘imperfect humility’) can never find fulfilment without divine Love (‘perfect humility’).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, 240-241. Martin Scofield suggests that the last two lines guide our understanding of ‘humility...as a recognition of transience’. See Scofield, *T. S. Eliot: The Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 219.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *The Annotated Luther, Volume 4: Pastoral Writings*, ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 334-335.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katharine Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 159.

<sup>4</sup> James Walsh, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 64-67.

In a broader sense that reinforces the intersection of precept (truth) and praxis (sacrifice), humility may be thought of in relation to asceticism, which similarly implies an irresolvable conflict between means and ends. Geoffrey Harpham characterises asceticism as ‘a dynamic, mobile ideology whose mark is *ceaseless* struggle towards a goal that is always *unreachable*, a goal whose realization is blocked by the very methods of achieving it’.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gavin Flood thinks of it as a paradoxical performance of subjectivity or the manifestation of an *ironic self*: ‘Through an act of will the ascetic self performs the ambiguity of its assertion in ascetic performance (a person needs great determination) and the telos of its eradication (a person intends the eradication of determination).’<sup>2</sup> The most eloquent formulation is Beckett’s in *Worstward Ho*: ‘All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught’ (*Com etc.*, 102).

As a component of humility, this self-cancelling is present in each of the last three *Quartets*, composed in close sequence. It is perhaps nowhere more clearly advocated than in Eliot’s adaptation of St John of the Cross, in which knowledge, possession, and destination are facilitated by a paradoxical embrace of their opposites:

And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
 And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not. (*PTSEI*, 189)

In addition to this *via negativa* and the lines about humility, *East Coker* emphasises process over product, effort over profit and loss: ‘For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business’ (191). *The Dry Salvages* similarly promotes a continual faring forward while discouraging concern for the ‘fruit of action’ (198). And *Little Gidding* characterizes exploration as incessant endeavour through which destinations become points of departure:

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 18, my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13, my emphasis.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. (208)

Here, conspicuously at the conclusion of the work, Eliot again employs ‘end’ against any hint of stasis, reinforcing humility’s endlessness. These poems, as Denis Donoghue puts it, ‘indicate not positions reached but the reaching of positions, the struggle toward an object not promised, not in the contract’.<sup>1</sup>

While the counteractive operation of humility may theologically be understood in relation to asceticism, its literary and philosophical counterpart is irony. By this I do not mean the merely antiphrastic or what Wayne Booth calls ‘stable ironies’ – those discoverable and ultimately decipherable ironies.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it implies a continually destabilising mode by which insoluble ambiguities are kept in tension and negate finality. Such is the mode of Kierkegaard’s dialectical irony which, much like asceticism, ‘continually cancels itself’; Friedrich Schlegel’s ‘permanent parabasis’, which sees irony as perpetually interruptive or *anacoluthic*; and Paul de Man’s ‘endless irony’, which effects ‘duplications of a self, specular structures within the self, within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance’.<sup>3</sup> More to the point of our discussion, it is the mode Allen Tate identified in his 1931 review of ‘Ash-Wednesday’, which argued that Eliot’s humility might be indexed by his irony.<sup>4</sup> The idea probably startled a number of critics who thought exactly the opposite – that the poet’s Laforguean turns, wry urbanity, and parodic pilfering of tradition were not without a hint of

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone: The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 229.

<sup>2</sup> See Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 3-8.

<sup>3</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: with continual reference to Socrates*, ed., trans., and intro. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 131; Schlegel in Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. and intro. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178-179; 169.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Tate, ‘Irony and Humility’, in Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 188-192.



self-importance.<sup>1</sup> What Tate had in mind, however, was a self-regarding gesture by which weakness was exposed in the work of art. In its subjective form, he writes, humility points to ‘a quality of the moral character, an habitual attitude’; aesthetically, and in the context of a poem, it is transformed into something that requires the reader’s sensitivity and participation: irony.

Irony is the particular and objective instance of humility – that is, it is an event or situation which induces humility in the mind of a spectator; it is that arrangement of experience, either premeditated by art or accidentally appearing in the affairs of men, which permits to the spectator an insight superior to that of the actor, and shows him that the practical formula, the special ambition of the actor is bound to fail. Humility is thus the self-respect proceeding from a sense of the folly of men in their desire to dominate a natural force or situation.<sup>2</sup>

Provocative as it is, the argument is questionable for two reasons. In the first instance, the language might suggest that Tate’s primary interest is not a theory of humility and irony but the advancement of a still incipient New Criticism agenda. Given the first several paragraphs’ fervent plea for critical separation of artist and art, the sly mimetic quality by which he assimilates the surrounding terminology of the ‘objective correlative’ makes sense.<sup>3</sup> A second concern is whether this ‘superior insight’ of the spectator does not amount to pride rather than humility, since what Tate describes is essentially the operation of satire – a mode of critique usually practised and enjoyed by those on the higher moral ground. Such, perhaps, is the lacerating laughter of Eliot’s quatrain poems, where the poetic voice often resembles the Baudelairean ‘absolute comic’ who witheringly measures a postlapsarian world against an

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Robert Nichols, in Brooker, *The Contemporary Reviews*, 28-30.

<sup>2</sup> Tate in Brooker, *Contemporary Reviews*, 190.

<sup>3</sup> The following words all appear in Eliot’s ‘Hamlet’: ‘particular’, ‘objective’, ‘event’, ‘situation’, and ‘formula’ (CP2, 125).

unflinching idea of good and evil.<sup>1</sup> But it is difficult to see how a statement of moral incompatibility necessarily translates into a statement of humility.<sup>2</sup>

These objections notwithstanding, the review anticipates the doubled-consciousness which, in the late poetry, would come to take a subtler though more self-searching form than it had in the early poetry. Juxtaposing the seduction scene of *The Waste Land* and the opening of 'Ash-Wednesday', Tate elides the poems' respective critiques of pride and pretension: the young man carbuncular is shown as 'he thinks he is', the poet-speaker is shown 'as he thinks himself for the moment to be'. Again drawing on Eliot's writing, Tate insinuates a deliberate *bovarysme* on the poet-speaker's part and thus posits irony as a form of *autocritique* rather than a criticism of the outside world. The effect, he concludes, is to disallow any straightforward conflation of Eliot's Christian 'case history' (whether biographical or polemical) and his Christian poetry.

Eliot himself prized the 'wit' and 'internal equilibrium' of certain poetry that goes beyond 'protests against some *outside* sentimentality or stupidity' (CP2, 319, my emphasis). Moreover, he characterised irony as a salient feature in the make-up of the 'highly sensitive man' (CP3, 304). This was his assessment of Bradley, whose diffident scepticism exuded 'a curious blend of humility and irony'. Another alignment of humility's endless striving alongside irony's ceaseless upheaval occurs in a *Criterion* 'Commentary' of April, 1933, where prominent mention is made of a book called *The Ironic Temper* by Haakon Chevalier. In the article, two types of irony are distinguished: irony as means to criticise and question, and irony as a form of tired disillusionment. Repeating his remarks on Bradley, Eliot writes that 'polemic irony...is a permanent weapon of the sensitive civilized man' (CP4, 516); he defends its interrogative function in society and its use to 'express a *dédoublement* of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the absolute comic, see Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel*, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Tate writes that the '[Young man carbuncular's] failure to understand his own position is irony, and the poet's insight into it is humility'. Eugene Goodheart also objects to Tate's reading of this relationship between irony and humility. See Goodheart, *The Failure of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 64.

personality against which the subject struggles'. (Unsurprisingly, Eliot's exemplar is Jules Laforgue, whose irony, Eliot had written elsewhere, is 'irony always employed *against himself*' [CP2, 744, my emphasis]). In contrast to this searching function of polemic irony, Eliot sees the ironic temper as a form of proud complacency. 'What we rebel against,' he affirms, '...is the use of irony to give the appearance of a philosophy of life, *as something final and not instrumental*, that leaves us now indifferent; it seems to us an evasion of the difficulty of living, where it pretends to be a kind of solution of it' (CP4, 516, my emphasis).

The resistance of finality stands behind the moral imperatives of *East Coker II*: avoid the 'deliberate hebetude' of cynical old age, know that 'knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies', and realise that humility is not final but continual, a means and not an end. The instrumental use of irony, however, must rely on an interrogative rather than imperative mode. One particular kind of instrumental irony that I will explore over the course of this chapter is the self-chastising absorption of another voice. The effect of this is twofold. Firstly, it unsettles the surety with which certain claims or denunciations are made. Secondly, it speaks to the humility of a lesson learnt. As an example of this ironic allusiveness one might think of the 'compound ghost' in the second part of *Little Gidding*: the voice, at once Eliot's and those of his 'dead master[s]' (Yeats, Mallarmé, Poe, Swift, Brunetto Latini, Dante), censures and brings tribute.

In the corresponding section of *East Coker*, Eliot achieves a similar though subtler form of doubling. A more useful analogue to this procedure is perhaps provided by what I will call the Copeland motif. In the margin of a student essay submitted by a young Tom Eliot in 1909, the following comment appears in red ink: 'Youthful rashness is not likely to be one of your attributes, at least till you are middle-aged' (CPI, 12 fn. 11). The words are Charles Townsend Copeland's, Harvard Professor of English and Eliot's instructor for English Composition, whose backbiting compliment had been prompted by his student's

attack on the ‘immaturity’ of Rudyard Kipling. A less obvious irony than Copeland’s anticipation of the Prufrock theme (circumspection of the prematurely middle-aged) is that the marginal comment appears in Eliot’s own hand. Putting aside the fact that Copeland dictated his remarks for students to copy, the juxtaposition between the cocksure claims in blue and the deflating antiphons in red offers a suggestive parallel to the patterns of undoing in Eliot’s mature writing, particularly in their opposition of youth and age.

This is true for *East Coker* and also much of Eliot’s essay writing of the time and beyond. Concerned with things said long ago, the late prose is marked by a number of vacillations that keep intact different opinions at different times. In *On Poetry and Poets*, Milton receives somewhat kindlier treatment; Goethe transitions from idiosyncratic visionary to universal sage; and despite inauspicious beginnings, Kipling is recognised for his maturity.<sup>1</sup> But the most significant reappraisal is of Yeats, whose otherworldliness and craftsmanship had respectively met with bemusement and polite nods in a younger, brasher Eliot’s writing.<sup>2</sup> Oddly, it is the older, more dogmatically rigid Eliot who would acknowledge expanding sympathies for his fellow poet: he admires the bareness of the late Yeats (*CP5*, 36), pays him the ‘highest of compliments’ (201) by positioning him not as the grand doyen of letters but as a contemporary (in 1935), and lauds his ceaseless development and honesty (258-260).<sup>3</sup> Eliot’s culminating tribute came in 1940, the year after Yeats’s death and the year in which *East Coker* was published:

[V]ery few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years. It requires, indeed, an exceptional honesty and courage to face the change. Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head,

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these reassessments are contained in *On Poetry and Poets*. For the most compelling overview of Eliot’s revised opinions, see Christopher Ricks, *Decisions and Revisions in T. S. Eliot* (London: British Library and Faber and Faber, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *CP1*, 724-725; *CP2*, 72-76.

<sup>3</sup> In seeing Yeats as a contemporary, Eliot was returning a compliment (*L7*, 358 fn. 1): ‘Yeats was always very gracious when one met him and had the art of treating younger writers as if they were his equals and contemporaries.’

with a hollow and wasted virtuosity. There is another and even worse temptation: that of becoming dignified, of becoming public figures with only a public existence – coat-racks hung with decorations and distinctions, doing, saying and even thinking and feeling only what they believe the public expects of them. (*CP6*, 82-83)

Something of the student essay's doubling – the master's lesson inscribed in the apprentice's hand – is discernible here, particularly if we are alert to the self-recriminations of a man who had gradually come to represent the reactionary rather than the advanced guard.<sup>1</sup> Eliot's assessment takes direction from 'Sailing to Byzantium', which likewise rankles against the institutionalised figure cut by the 'aged man'.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence...<sup>2</sup>

The poem's 'tattered coat upon a stick' becomes the essay's 'coat-rack'; 'Monuments of its own magnificence' correlates in similar alliterative fashion to 'decorations and distinctions'. But most important is the mutual rebellion against crediting age with surety and serenity. An old man's singing soul, Yeats intimates, is directly proportional to its frailty and fallibility, to its humiliations and humiliations, to the 'tatter[s] in its mortal dress'.

The reappraisal of Yeats's achievement should also be read in relation to Eliot's denunciations at the time: if Yeats positively exemplified the old man as explorer, John Masefield represented an undesirable inverse. Eliot's carping *New English Weekly* column of September 1935 took issue with the Poet Laureate's claim that older poets are benevolently

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity: Before and After Eliot* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 134.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. and intro. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), 239.

disposed towards their juniors. Such a role, Eliot claims, involves pretence, posturing, and self-delusion: 'I am sure that all elder poets *believe* that they wish to encourage and help younger ones, they *believe* that they really care for poetry, and not merely for what they write themselves' (CP5, 268). The ironic emphasis frames the established writer's disinterested service as a kind of *bovarysme*, implying that the act of endorsement seldom constitutes more than disguised self-perpetuation. Few older poets are able to admire work other than their own. They are also often blind to the appreciation of imitators: 'an imitation of one's own work, which one enjoys because it reminds one of one's own work, but which one fancies to be highly original, is what gives the maximum of pleasure at the slightest *cost of pain and effort and humility*' (268, my emphasis). In essence, Eliot's theme is not the relation between young and old but a struggle within the mature poet himself that disallows sagely self-regard and requires something akin to the sacrifice of personality advocated in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Reformulated as a trenchant mode of self-criticism, the process involves an endless humility that rests upon endless humiliation: the mature poet must 'perpetually [reject] his own work, passing through the phase of being *embarrassed and ashamed*, to become able to regard it almost as detachedly as if it were not his, and to interest himself solely in that part of his work which he has not yet written' (269, my emphasis).

The question in turning to the 'endless' humility of *East Coker* is whether the poetry bears any such traces of embarrassment and shame, of humiliation: does it constitute a performance of a self-rejection rather than simply signalling a new point of departure? In a poem whose imitations at once bespeak homage and mastery, such scepticism is valid. On the one hand, the sometimes debt-declaring practice of *Four Quartets* may be seen as part of that 'systematic negation of...aesthetic self-sufficiency' which C. D. Blanton identifies in late

modernism.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on the process of ageing, Eliot once noted the peculiar desire to ‘shrink into one’s family’ (*L3*, 649). In literary terms, such desire might involve taking a humble position among your predecessors. On the other hand it might be argued that Eliot further entrenches his own canonicity, not so much becoming the bearer of tradition as claiming the position for himself.<sup>2</sup> After all, he is hailed by Harold Bloom as an exemplary exponent of ‘reverse *apophrades*’ – that paradoxical manoeuvre by which the dead return only to speak in the voices of their descendants.<sup>3</sup> In this view, a late work like *Four Quartets* becomes a site of the hospitably hostile, a poem ‘held open to the precursor, where once it was open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work’.<sup>4</sup> As compelling as this argument may be in Eliot’s case, my interest is in a slightly modified effect: how the poem’s allusions and assimilations may be read as self-correcting rather than self-asserting. Or to cast the question in terms of the Copeland motif: how do the words of another stand as a critique from within rather than from outside, inscribed within the text itself and in the author’s own hand?

In the remainder of the chapter, I will pay particular attention to three Yeatsian traces in *East Coker II* that in different ways unsettle the poem’s surety and facilitate self-criticism. The first of these is stylistic and concerns the opening sequence of the poem’s second movement. With the dense symbolism of these lines supposedly a parody of Yeats under the star of Blake, Eliot’s claim of unsatisfactoriness is read as self-reflexive of a negative, dismissive, and parodic mode within his own poetry. The second trace involves Yeats’s

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<sup>1</sup> C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Consider Eliot’s characterisation of borrowing as a type of anointment (*CP2*, 67): ‘We do not imitate, we are changed; and our work is the work of the changed man; we have not borrowed, we have been quickened, and we become bearers of a tradition.’

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), 141-142.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 15-16.

criticism of Eliot in two essays which *East Coker* absorbs in spirit and letter. Here, a faint self-allusion to 'A Cooking Egg' renders more clearly a certain petulance in the late poem while also suggesting the speaker's complicity in having been cheated out of 'autumnal serenity'. The third trace is a borrowing from Yeats's 'An Acre of Grass', which further equivocates the poem's anger with old men as an anger directed at Eliot himself.

### **Parody: 'What is the late Eliot doing?'**

Turning to the first instance of the Copeland motif, I quote the opening seventeen lines of *East Coker II* in full, followed by Eliot's explanatory letter to John Hayward:

What is the late November doing  
With the disturbance of the spring  
And creatures of the summer heat,  
And snowdrops writhing under feet  
And hollyhocks that aim too high  
Red into grey and tumble down  
Late roses filled with early snow?  
Thunder rolled by the rolling stars  
Simulates triumphal cars  
Deployed in constellated wars  
Scorpion fights against the Sun  
Until the Sun and Moon go down  
Comets weep and Leonids fly  
Hunt the heavens and the plains  
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring  
The world to that destructive fire  
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns. (*PTSEI*, 186-187)

I don't know whether it strikes a reader (what I intended) that the first passage of section II is meant to be a kind of parody of the earlier Yeats influenced by Blake (some of his poems are very much so); but that at the same time I use the word 'parody' only because I can think of no other: *the effect of a very small pinch of irony*



*is not intended to be comic, and in any case the irony is not directed against Yeats – is not literary criticism – but a part of something going on within my own mind at that point. (in PTSE1, 935, my emphasis; 19 July 1940)*

It is testament to the sincerity of Eliot's intentions that no scholarship has picked up on the imitation. While Ricks and McCue indicate an allusion to Blake's 'To the Jews' in the first line, they venture no possible echoes of Yeats independent of this letter (*PTSE1*, 935). Concealment was perhaps necessary overcompensation. To have detected the conscious designs would also have required condemning it as in bad taste: how ill-judged to parody the early work of a great artist recently deceased. Indeed, the tracks were so well covered that Eliot's most trusted reader, John Hayward, registered only a reference to Eliot's own work – the 'rolling stars' and 'constellated wars' calling to mind the 'inveterate scars' and 'forgotten wars' of *Burnt Norton* (see *PTSE2*, 496). Apart from shared line-endings and symbolically-charged tetrameters, there is also a communion of imagery between the two poems' corresponding sections: 'Garlic' was initially the 'Thunder' of Mallarmé's 'Tonnerre et rubis' (also alluded to in a draft of 'Lines for an Old Man'), which makes its way into the line 'Thunder rolled by the rolling stars'.<sup>1</sup>

'Reading a parody,' Donald Davie remarks, 'we are inevitably aware...of the parodist.'<sup>2</sup> And given the immediacy with which Eliot's own poetry is called to mind in the opening sequence, a reader might reasonably ask how Yeats is meant to be glimpsed in this 'periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion'. An immediate obstacle is diction. A word-scan reveals that 'November', 'disturbance', 'Simulates', 'deployed', 'triumphal' do not occur in Yeats. While 'vortex' is a key word in *A Vision*, it is absent from the poetry. The flora too – snowdrops, hollyhocks – are alien to his work. (Roses, of course, are abundant, but Eliot's debt in line seven is to Thomas Campion's 'There is a Garden in her Face').

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<sup>1</sup> See Ricks and McCue, *PTSE1*, 913; *PTSE2*, 468.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Davie, 'T. S. Eliot: The End of an Era', in *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Views*, ed. Hugh Kenner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), 204.

Admittedly the parody of a style does not require the duplication of its lexicon, and a case could be made that Eliot broadly gestures at Blakean/Yeatsian antinomies or ‘contraries’ as the poem initiates its own binary opposition between young and old.<sup>1</sup> But given Eliot’s meticulousness in choosing the right word for the determined purpose, it is perhaps surprising that there is so little verbal congruence with the early Yeats.<sup>2</sup>

A more problematic disconnect, however, is between mode and content. Even if we squintingly glean the silhouette of early Yeats in Eliot’s ‘apocalyptic visionary mode’, as John Xiros Cooper puts it, it is difficult to reconcile this with the ostensible theme: the unpleasant stirrings of youth in age.<sup>3</sup> It is a recognizably Yeatsian theme, perhaps *the* recognizably Yeatsian theme as singled out in Eliot’s memorial lecture.<sup>4</sup> But it is synonymous with the late work and therefore synonymous with what Eliot identified as the late work’s ‘purging of poetical ornament’ (CP6, 85). The particular compound ghost that emerges thus has a dual function: it belies the claim that this *was* a way of putting it and, in so doing, casts suspicion on the turn (or parabasis, to use the language of irony) that declares indirectly its superiority over a ‘worn-out’ mode of expression.

Eliot’s parody, it would seem, rests on an anachronistic consolidation that enables the ‘recrudescence of an ancient passion in a new emotion, in a new situation’ (CP3, 722). Though these words refer to Dante and not to Yeats, they have bearing on both the theme of emotional and spiritual ‘recrudescence’ in *East Coker II*, and also on the allusive manoeuvre that at once pays tribute to a dead master and appropriates the words of that master in a self-

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of such antinomies, see Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* (New York, NY: Russell and Russell, 1986), 5-7; Northrop Frye, ‘Yeats and the Language of Symbolism’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1946): 13.

<sup>2</sup> By way of contrast, see Eliot’s discussion of his scrupulous rejection of ‘antelucan’ in a draft of *Little Gidding II*. ‘Scylla and Charybdis’, *Agenda: T. S. Eliot Special Issue* (1985): 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> John Xiros Cooper, *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 176.

<sup>4</sup> See Eliot’s discussion of Yeats’s ‘The Spur’ and *Purgatory* (CP6, 83).

punitive fashion. Eliot's memorable phrase occurs in his appraisal of *Purgatory* 30 at the moment when Dante is reunited with Beatrice and deserted by Virgil:

Olive-crowned over a white veil, a lady appeared to me, clad under a green mantle in colour of living flame. And my spirit, after so many years since trembling in her presence it had been broken with awe, without further knowledge by eyes, felt, through hidden power which went out from her, the great strength of the old love. As soon as that lofty power struck my sense, which already had transfixed me before my adolescence, I turned leftwards with the trust of the little child who runs to his mama when he is frightened or distressed, to say to Virgil: 'Hardly a drop of blood in my body does not shudder: *I know the tokens of the ancient flame.*' (CP3, 722, my emphasis)

With youth's love rekindled, Dante wishes to express a renewed and personal appreciation of lines from Book 4 of *The Aeneid* (the italicised lines). But the irony of this allusion is doubled both by Virgil's departure and by the Pilgrim's infelicitous invocation of Dido. It is infelicitous because, as commentators have remarked, the words here recalled point to the symbolic correlation of Dido's own rediscovery of passion (Aeneas awakens the love she had for her deceased husband, Sychaeus) and her tragic self-immolation.<sup>1</sup> Comparably, Dante's reunion with Beatrice implies not merely the flame of love but also the flame of purgation: his beloved's first words call him to account for moral fickleness.<sup>2</sup> With this context in mind, the passage offers a precursor to the Copeland motif. Given in his Tuscan tongue ('conosco i segni dell' antica fiamma') rather than in Virgil's Latin ('adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae') and directed at a vanished presence, the allusion fittingly reveals its own vanity – vanity in its dual sense as emptiness and pride.<sup>3</sup> Though Dante weeps for his literary forebear ('my dearest father...to whom for my salvation I had giv'n me'), he is soon reminded that he

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 130.

<sup>2</sup> These flames are redoubled in *Little Gidding IV* (PTSE1, 207).

<sup>3</sup> Eliot discusses this borrowing in a letter of 1929, comparing the Latin and Italian (L4, 706-707).

should rather weep for his sins.<sup>1</sup> The poetry does not matter, and the allusion stands as a stark reminder of the fact.

The parallel with the opening of *East Coker II* is far from exact. Dante wishes to bring tribute to the fullness of his master's language, while Eliot, however respectfully, parodies quaint poetic expression. Yet in both cases the act of imitation becomes an act of assimilation by which the younger poet draws attention to his own failings. This aspect is cast in relief by allusions in both Canto 30 and *East Coker II* that unambiguously recall and affirm the master's achievement. Dante reproduces a line from Book 6 of *The Aeneid* in the Latin and moreover gives it sanctioning rhyme with biblical scripture: 'All of them cried: "*Benedictus qui venis*," [Matt 23:39] / and scattering flowers upward and around, "*Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis*." [Aen.6.883].'<sup>2</sup> (It is telling that one commentator considers this allusion and not the Dido reference as Dante's 'last tribute to the beloved Latin teacher').<sup>3</sup> Eliot, in his turn, borrows 'frenzy' from 'An Acre of Grass' (discussed below), aligning his own poem's rejection of sage maturity with that of Yeats's. But as in *Purgatory* 30, a contrast emerges in *East Coker II* by which the master's achievement remains intact while the apprentice emerges scathed by his misprision.

However, to read Eliot's parody only as a noble, self-denigrating gesture is to overlook an inherent tension between humility and pride, submission and strength, apprenticeship and mastery. Harry Blamires has hinted at the potential for false modesty in the opening sequence, arguing that the poet manages 'to have his cake and eat it' by exhibiting great expressive dexterity while denouncing it as inadequate for the ends of

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Pur.*30.50-51.

<sup>2</sup> Dante, *Pur.*30.19-21. Here I use Mandelbaum's translation, who preserves the Latin. *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, NY: Knopf, 1995). The biblical verse is Matt 23:39 in which Christ actually quotes the prophetic words of Psalm 118:26.

<sup>3</sup> Courtney Langdon, 'Interpretive Analysis of the *Purgatorio*', in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2: Purgatorio*, trans. Langdon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), cxix.

modern poetry.<sup>1</sup> Such a view would seem to be borne out by Eliot's remarks in an interview given towards the end of 1940 in which he asserted the necessity of continually bringing poetic expression up to date:

*the way of putting* words together is always changing. Any style, whether of prose or verse, belongs to its own period: and no writer, however skilful, can say anything that is important for his own time, or for any future time, in a style, however good, which belongs to a past age. (CP6, 132-133, my emphasis)

It is tempting to regard the sentiment and its partial echo from *East Coker* as a subconscious admission of the poem's antipathy towards Yeats, or as proof of parody in what Adorno calls its emphatic sense: 'the use of forms in the era of their impossibility.'<sup>2</sup> But if Eliot is to be taken at his word, we should remember that the parody was not intended as 'literary criticism'. This is not to discount that he might be embroiled in the anxiety of influence or that he places himself in ambivalently combative relation to Yeats, but to recognize that the subject matter for Eliot's interview is not the subject matter for his poem. In fact, it is exactly the aforementioned anxiety and competition that stands at the core of the poem's engagement with humility. Witness his statement on the subject of emulation in a 1939 'Commentary' ('That Poetry is Made with Words'), followed by its humbling revision in *East Coker*:

It is true, I think, that poetry, if it is not to be a lifeless repetition of forms, must constantly be exploring 'the frontiers of the spirit.' But these frontiers are not like the surveys of geographical explorers, conquered once for all and settled. The frontiers of the spirit are more like the jungle which, unless continuously kept under control, is always ready to encroach and eventually obliterate the cultivated area. Our effort is as much to regain, under very different conditions, what was known to men writing at remote times and in alien languages. (CP5, 669)

And what there is to conquer

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A Guide through Eliot's Four Quartets* (London: Methuen and Co., 1969), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 259.

By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
 To emulate – but there is no competition –  
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
 That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
 For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (*PTSEI*, 191)

The poetry is marked by the quiet interplay of those opposites mentioned above. There is a straining modesty in ‘men whom one cannot hope / To emulate’ – a modesty which simultaneously bespeaks and suppresses the intention to surpass.<sup>1</sup> The strife of desiring another’s gift and scope but also of striving against such desire is brought into sharp focus by the interruption, the anacoluthon (‘– there is no competition –’) that chastens the double impulse. Similarly, the medial caesura in the penultimate line pulls the speaker up sharply so that he can refocus the poem’s understanding of humility. These local self-corrections fall within a larger dialogic chastisement in which Eliot the poet checks Eliot the poetry theorist, foreclosing any question about attainment while nonetheless demanding continual pursuit.

The same kind of chastisement is operational in the opening sequence since it enacts this fraught emulation. Though the depth of self-criticism in these lines is not immediately apparent without a thorough consideration of the subsequent disparagement of age in which Eliot more openly invokes Yeats, they offer an instance of the master/apprentice tension in which the correcting voice is assimilated and turned inward.<sup>2</sup> With the emphasis on an interiority rather than some ‘outside stupidity’, the subsequent metapoetic discursion invites us to see the parody as self-reflexive: not merely Yeats’s Blake-influenced poetry, but Eliot’s

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<sup>1</sup> Dedicating his *Criterion* ‘Commentary’ to Yeats on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Eliot wrote that the older poet’s development ‘sets a standard which his juniors should seek to emulate, without hoping to equal’ (*CP5*, 260).

<sup>2</sup> See Eliot’s letter of 31 December, 1940, to Geoffrey Curtis (*PTSEI*, 935): ‘The first movement of part II is a *serious* kind of parody of early Yeats under the influence of Blake. Otherwise I should have thought that Yeats was chiefly apparent in the references to old age (with a difference).’

parody of it constitutes something ‘not very satisfactory’ (*PTSEI*, 187). Nor is it, pressing further, merely Eliot’s mimicking of himself (*Burnt Norton*) that stirs dissatisfaction, but rather a negative mode that keeps within its stable the parodic, satiric, and dismissive.

### **Cheated and cheating: ‘A Cooking Egg’ in *East Coker***

This self-parody comes sharply into focus when read against the second appropriation of Yeats, particularly because it involves the older poet’s criticism of the younger.<sup>1</sup> In 1936 Yeats wrote two essays that expressed a distaste for Eliot’s negative poetics. The first of these was the introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), which relegated Eliot to the rank of mere satirist and attributed his success to accomplished descriptions of modern banality and the rejection of romantic forms and values.<sup>2</sup> (In view of the opening sequence of *East Coker II*, the words have a prophetic irony). The second essay, ‘Modern Poetry’, levelled similar charges, declaring an outright aversion to the morbid *ennui* in Eliot:

In the third year of the War came the most revolutionary man in poetry during my lifetime, though his revolution was stylistic alone.... No romantic word or sound, nothing reminiscent, nothing in the least like the painting of Ricketts could be permitted henceforth. Poetry must resemble prose, and both must accept the vocabulary of their time; nor must there be any special subject-matter. Tristram and Isolde were not a more suitable theme than Paddington Railway Station. The past had deceived us: let us accept the worthless present.<sup>3</sup>

Though the first sentence situates the reader among the ironies of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, the chronological sweep of the passage is potentially much broader. The deceiving past brings to mind ‘Gerontion’, the tragedy of Tristan and Isolde involves *The*

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<sup>1</sup> With Yeats’s insults against Eliot in mind, Neil Corcoran regards Yeats’s presence in *Little Gidding* as an instance of Eliot’s humility. See Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), xxi-xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘Modern Poetry’, in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 499.

*Waste Land*, and mention of Paddington Station might, via Blake, simultaneously point to ‘A Cooking Egg’ and *Burnt Norton*.<sup>1</sup> Yeats’s free indirect discourse would also suggest a grievance with what he perceived as his subject’s dictatorial literary criticism.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not this sweep was intended, *East Coker II* demonstrates Eliot’s alertness to the essay’s possible echoes and criticisms of particular works, not to mention the sly irony in this poetry that very nearly resembles prose. The lines ‘Had they deceived us, / Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders...?’ (*PTSEI*, 187) engage ‘Modern Poetry’ directly. At first glance, they seem to turn Yeats’s accusation on its head, implicating not abstract history but an older generation in an act of deceit. Admitting that the disenfranchisement of young men was due to ‘the blundering frenzy of old men’, the essay invites this line of attack and grants historical grounds for the rise of the literature of disillusionment Yeats deprecates.<sup>3</sup> But the adopted/adapted line (‘The past had deceived us’ / ‘Had they deceived us’) may also be seen to transfer the petulance and fatalism that takes a cheating past as sufficient reason to devalue the present.<sup>4</sup>

In this light, Blake’s presence begins to make sense: by recalling ‘To the Jews’ in the opening line, Eliot invites the reader to recall his former allusion to that poem in ‘A Cooking Egg’ (1919). If any of the early works dramatize a fatalistic surrender of youth and hope, it is this quatrain poem. But the *lacrimae rerum* note is struck with such force, such exaggeration, that it becomes difficult to gauge the sincerity of feeling. The speaker’s facetious bluster would suggest that Pipit in all her sad domesticity could never live up to his need for honour, capital, society and spiritual enlightenment.

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<sup>1</sup> Later in the essay (503-504), Yeats quotes from *Burnt Norton*, which had recently been published. The place naming in the third movement calls to mind Blake’s *Jerusalem*.

<sup>2</sup> Yeats’s distaste for Eliot’s prose style is detailed in an unpublished letter to Thomas McGreevy of 19 March, 1931. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters: Electronic Edition*. Website visited on 8 September, 2017: [http://pm.nlx.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=yeats\\_c/yeats\\_c.04.xml;chunk.id=div.el.yeats.unpublished.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.el.yeats.unpublished.1;brand=default](http://pm.nlx.com.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=yeats_c/yeats_c.04.xml;chunk.id=div.el.yeats.unpublished.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.el.yeats.unpublished.1;brand=default).

<sup>3</sup> Yeats, ‘Modern Poetry,’ 500.

<sup>4</sup> Ricks and McCue (*PTSEI*, 937) provide one of Hugh Latimer’s sermons as a possible source for lines 25-26. While there is an obvious verbal parallel with the Latimer, its meaning does not transfer since the speaker in the latter work is Christ.



I shall not want Society in Heaven,  
Lucretia Borgia shall be my Bride;  
Her anecdotes will be more amusing  
Than Pipit's experience could provide. (*PTSEI*, 38)

While his daydream permits him handshakes with courtiers, consuls, initiates and financiers, he is inevitably led to ask where the snows of yesteryear have gone. The epigraph, taken from Villon's *The Testament* (a work that catalogues its author's sins and scandals), obscures only for a moment the glaring fact that the speaker's disgrace stems from inertia rather than misconduct. Similarly, the guest-list he maps out suggests his own vitiated earthly existence. He would have us believe that Pipit is past her expiry date, but it is really his youth that has been squandered and his future that tenders compromise.<sup>1</sup>

The typographical break after line 24 is also the breaking of the speaker's resolve. Unable to keep up the pretence, he looks wistfully over his shoulder. Gone are the jokes, and gone is the glory. Even the quatrain sequence crumbles, and the poem terminates not on a neat rhyme but on three plodding stresses:

Where are the eagles and the trumpets?  
  
Buried beneath some snow-deep Alps.  
Over buttered scones and crumpets  
Weeping, weeping multitudes  
Droop in a hundred A. B. C.'s. (*PTSEI*, 39)

As in *Coriolan*, published in 1931, the symbols of victory and dominion are replaced by a base need to sate hunger: the masses seeking distraction and comfort in cloned Aerated Bread Company restaurants. It is here that Blake's 'To the Jews' enters the poem ('What are those

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paragraph and the next have been published. Rick de Villiers, 'Banishing the Backward Devils: Eliot's Quatrain Poems and "Gerontion"', in *The New Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. Jason Harding (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 59-60.

golden builders doing / Near mournful ever-weeping Paddington...) and is channelled through the overrun London suburbs, pervasive weeping, and *ubi sunt* forlornness (with Villon). But the wistfulness is tinged by irony and disgruntlement, thus validating Yeats's observation about the anathematic status of romantic reminiscences. While the longing for the intimacy of the shared penny bun is undercut by damning vulgarity (Pipit and the speaker, too, are seen in the shadow of the Dantean hordes eating 'battered scones and crumpets'), the pining after 'eagles and trumpets' is marred by an implicit sense of entitlement. And while this line – isolated, calling attention to itself, hyperbolically grandiose – serves as another instance of wry self-awareness, its swagger only highlights that the speaker feels cheated.

This note carries into *East Coker II*: 'What was to be the value of the long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age?' By sleight of hand, the poem appears to cast its gripe as the frustration of a universal hope ('It was not...what *one* had expected') before distilling it in more personal terms ('Had *they* deceived *us*'). This modulation of voice demarcates a structural division within the second stanza which more clearly intimates the liminal presence of 'A Cooking Egg'. Since the metapoetic interjection and the impersonal pronoun typify the voice heard in lines 18-22, the actual resumption of the theme is signalled by repeating the interrogative that initiates the movement and also calls Blake to mind. Thus we find verbal and thematic contiguity between 'What are those golden Builders doing', 'Where are the eagles and trumpets?', 'What is the late November doing', and 'What was to be the value'.

No less than in 'A Cooking Egg', then, there is disappointment in *East Coker* about thwarted expectations. And if the early poem assists in rendering the plaintive tone of the late poem, it also transfers the theme of complicity. In *East Coker* it is ostensibly the quiet-voiced elders who are to blame for deceiving the young. But there is an indeterminacy about the position of the speaker that not only angles the poem's criticisms at the deceptions of the old

but also at the complacency and misguided hopes of the young. When pausing to consider what these hopes are, it becomes apparent that a certain self-deception (and self-implication) is being exposed. One might reasonably wonder whether the ‘long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm’ is a universal concern among the young. A more probable source for the longing is Eliot’s own poetry, which so often juxtaposes the anxieties of desire alongside the escape from desire. The tension is central to the experiences of Prufrock, who ‘grows old’ and discounts the probability (yet desires) that the mermaids will sing to him (*PTSEI*, 9). The same tension is felt in the undertow of ‘La Figlia Che Piange’, whose speaker would rather not that his ‘afternoon repose’ (28) be disturbed by the desires of youth yet cannot avoid being ‘amazed’ by what he disingenuously calls ‘cogitations’. And pertinent to our discussion, ‘A Cooking Egg’ pits the safe cerebrations about the future against an earthly life with Pipit.

In *East Coker*, as in each of these cases, the longing for calm is born out of the mixing of memory and desire. And as in these earlier poems, the late poem effects that ‘*dédoublement* of the personality against which the subject struggles’. Donald Davie remarks that, if Eliot parodically inserts himself into his own poems, ‘his reader must do likewise, changing his focus as the poem changes focus, knowing when to give almost full credence to what the poetry says, when to make reservations according as he detects the voice of now one persona, now another parodying the first’.<sup>1</sup> So it is important to recognize that while appearing to speak on behalf of those anticipating the ‘autumnal serenity’ of maturity, the speaker can only be disabused of his misconceptions about age by arriving at the terminus himself. In this light, the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ seems spurious. Just as the parody of Yeats in the opening section implies a parody of Eliot himself, so the complaint against old

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<sup>1</sup> Davie, ‘The End of an Era’, 204.

men functions as a complaint against the speaker himself. It is in these ironies and doublings that the poem's textual humility resides.

### **Lines for old men: inaction, complicity, and humility**

Another early poem that functions in this double manner is 'Gerontion'. It is recalled both by the wording in Yeats's essay and in another Yeatsian trace. Beginning as approving reiteration, the third allusion to Yeats transforms into an internalised critique directed at Eliot himself, Yeats, and the wisdom of other old men like Gerontion:

Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. (*PTSEI*, 188)

The thread of Yeats's 'An Acre of Grass' is picked up again after the opening of *East Coker*, which admits to its symbols of dissipation the 'old house' and the stirrings of a mouse.<sup>1</sup> In the second movement Eliot recasts not only that poem's wished-for 'frenzy' but the urgency of its imperative mood ('Grant me an old man's frenzy'). Side by side, these poems dramatize the disappointments of age and its obscure vantage point: for Yeats, the aged mind cannot 'make the truth known'; for Eliot, there is 'only the knowledge of dead secrets' (*PTSEI*, 187). In the face of such disappointments the poems pursue a similar antidote through dissimilar means. Whereas Yeats's course is affirmative and identifies a vitalising frenzy in figures such as Lear, Timon, Blake (again), and Michelangelo, Eliot's course is negative, sardonically wishing to be disabused of the virtues of age by exposure to its vices.

With its absorption and modification of Yeats's poem (and also the 'blundering frenzy of old men' in 'Modern Poetry'), the injunction to hear of old men's fear of frenzy emerges

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<sup>1</sup> Yeats, *The Poems*, 348-349. See also 'Ancestral Houses' (246-247) which has in common with *East Coker* a picture of passing legacies: the inheritor of the stately home is 'but a mouse'. See Sabine Roth, 'Eliot Comforted: The Yeatsian Presence in "Four Quartets"', *Journal of Modern Literature* 18, no. 4 (1993): 411-420.

as another variation of the Copeland motif. No reader familiar with Eliot's early and middle poetry can miss the invitation to conjure examples of old (or middle-aged) men insulated by overcautious self-possession: the solipsistic Prufrock, the controlling speaker of 'La Figlia Che Piange', the passive Gerontion. The latter offers the most compelling connections. While 'Gerontion' declares that 'History...deceives with whispering ambitions' (*PTSEI*, 31-33), the late work imputes the deceit of 'quiet-voiced elders'; there is thus a triple overlap involving the past, deception, and muted communications. Both poems also make reference to an apocalyptic wind. The named creatures of 'Gerontion' are 'whirled...in atoms'; so too, in *East Coker II*, stars and comets are 'Whirled in a vortex'. Furthermore, in 'Gerontion' the nightmare of history 'gives' but vainly ('with supple confusion', 'too soon', 'too late'), and in *East Coker II* old men bequeath what is false or no longer useful. Not unlike in 'A Cooking Egg', both speakers feel cheated by an anteriority – whether abstract or personified – and both register the feeling from a vantage point beyond youth.

The link between 'Gerontion' and *East Coker II* seems to elicit an antagonistic relationship: in ridiculing the fear and insularity of old men, the late poem asks us to remember Gerontion's inaction and failure of 'closer contact'. Marina MacKay offers an incisive reading in which the political recriminations implicit in the early poem are dredged up in the late poem in order to establish continuity between the post-World War I failures and those leading up to the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> While this is certainly one function of the self-allusion to 'Gerontion', it is by no means the only function. For as much as *East Coker II* stands inscribed in red next to the enervations of 'Gerontion', 'Gerontion' troubles the margins of *East Coker II*. Indeed, the correspondences listed above would suggest something of a self-punitive recollection, an admission of complicity, or what *Little Gidding* calls the 'rending pain of re-enactment' (*PTSEI*, 205). For 'Gerontion' not only triangulates with

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<sup>1</sup> See Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 74.

Yeats's criticism in 'Modern Poetry' and its absorption in *East Coker II*, but it further reinforces the ironic doubling within the late poem.

In 'Gerontion', the intermediary position of the speaker is consolidated by the poem's epigraph from *Measure for Measure*. While Gerontion is declared an old man both nominally and expressly, the play's accusatory words locate him in a nebulous zone:

Thou hast nor youth, nor age,  
But as it were an after-dinner's sleep  
Dreaming on both; for all thy blessed youth  
Becomes as aged, and doth beg the alms  
Of palsied eld: and when thou art old and rich,  
Thou hast neither heat, affection, limb, nor beauty  
To make thy riches pleasant. What's yet in this  
That bears the name of life? (III.i.32-39)<sup>1</sup>

The words of the Duke are meant to fortify the condemned Claudio in a stoical embrace of whatever fate he may meet. He does this by deriding the quintessential weakness of humans: our nobility is a product of our baseness, our selfhood splintered ('thou exists on many a thousand grains'), our life subject to 'skyey influences'. These sentiments are perpetuated and pushed to an almost quietist extreme in 'Gerontion'. In his lament about the untimely gifts of history and his invalidation of the consequences of moral action, Gerontion seems to parody the Duke: virtue stems from vice (and *vice versa*), self-consciousness is the sum of 'a thousand small deliberations', and in being 'whirled / Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear / In fractured atoms', life is governed by external forces.

By way of 'Gerontion', some of these resignations have residual life in *East Coker II*. Employing a rhetoric of devaluation comparable to Gerontion's and the Duke's, the speaker expresses disenchantment with the 'value' of age. In this depreciation 'serenity' becomes

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Updated Edition, ed. Brian Gibbons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

‘deliberate hebetude’, ‘wisdom’ the ‘knowledge of dead secrets’, and self-knowledge only an epistemic atomization: ‘every moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been.’ There is also a degree of correspondence in the negative pedagogy: to get the most out of what living is left, the Duke instructs, be ‘absolute for death’; to gain wisdom, the poem’s speaker urges, be edified by folly.

As theorists of intertextuality are quick to stress, there is a difference between allusion and source. An allusion is the deliberate invocation of a text by an author which is meant to enrich interpretive possibilities; a source may be involved in the initial stages of imaginative creation but is not directly woven into the fabric of the poem.<sup>1</sup> In the case of *East Coker II*, *Measure for Measure* perhaps appropriately falls somewhere between these categories: while the text is not directly invoked, it resonates *via* ‘Gerontion’. The effect, however, is far from salutary and serves to highlight a dangerous passivity. In its original context, the Duke’s wisdom aligns with a Christian disregard for self. Indeed, the phrase ‘a breath thou art’ draws on James 4:13-14 and its admonishments against an over-anxious concern for the future:

Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

Likewise, Claudio is instructed in the way of endless, teleologically divested, humility: forget yourself and also any question of gain. But in ‘Gerontion’ this self-surrender is perverted into a fatalistic despair which *East Coker* handles ambivalently: it is rejected when calling on ‘Old men...to be explorers’ (*PTSEI*, 191) but subsumed in resigning to the notion that quiet-voiced elders have cheated their juniors.

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<sup>1</sup> See Eleanor Cook, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 100; Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-4; Leonard Unger, *Eliot’s Compound Ghost: Influence and Confluence* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 4-5.

It is worth recalling that ‘Gerontion’ was written in the aftermath of the First World War and that its personification of moral torpor stands, in Vincent Sherry’s estimation, as ‘reference and rebuke’ to the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>1</sup> As a product of its time, *East Coker* may similarly be read as a statement of disgust at the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the eventuation of another devastating global conflict. This is MacKay’s view, who persuasively argues that the poem’s invocation of ‘Gerontion’ reinforces its criticism of the ‘dissociated passivity’ of the gerontocracy leading up to the outbreak of war.<sup>2</sup> While this is certainly true at one level, the ironies and ambivalences of the poem make it impossible to see *East Coker* as a condemnation untouched by either self-reflexivity or an admission of complicity. The fact of the speaker’s doubleness in *East Coker II* – cumulatively suggested by the presence of the earlier poems – gestures at moral entanglement.<sup>3</sup> And in this regard, the poem stands as a companion piece to the conclusion of *The Idea of a Christian Society*, published five months before *East Coker* on 26 October, 1939:

I believe that there must be many persons who, like myself, were deeply shaken by the events of September 1938, in a way from which one does not recover; persons to whom that month brought a profounder realisation of a general plight.... *The feeling which was new and unexpected was a feeling of humiliation, which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment; what had happened was something in which one was deeply implicated and responsible.* It was not, I repeat, a criticism of the government, but a doubt of the validity of civilization. We could not match conviction with conviction, we had no ideas with which we could either meet or oppose the ideas opposed to us. (CP5, 717, my emphasis)

With this declaration of personal responsibility in mind, it is important to recognise how *East Coker II* disallows too direct a scapegoating of the gerontocracy. During the

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>2</sup> MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 74

<sup>3</sup> Steve Ellis writes that the ‘post-Munich journey is for Eliot not one of collective uplift, enthusiasm and worldwide triumph in the war against selfishness rather than against fascism, but an intensification of a state of penance and alienation, a renewed sense of limitation both personal and collective’. Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 28.



denunciation of the ‘wisdom of old men’, one particular line opens onto a syntactical ambiguity that not only extends the disavowal of the quiet-voiced elders but also introduces a critique of the voice that disavows: ‘Let me hear of old men’s fear of frenzy’, as well as ‘Let me hear of their frenzy’. Differently put, Eliot’s phrasing allows an irreducible doubleness to emerge that simultaneously ironizes timidity and brazenness – the latter, like the former, a hindrance to endless humility. Read in this second way (‘Let me hear of their frenzy’), the line is representative of the ironic mode within *Four Quartets* that disallows the late poetic voice to find solace and superiority in the fact of its lateness. It is a mode that interrogates those moments that would otherwise declare themselves as interrogative. To use De Man’s fine formulation again: it is irony that manifests ‘specular structures within the self, within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance’. So when the knowing voice of the second movement declares the first to be ‘not very satisfactory’, there is yet another voice calling it into question. When the speaker notes his disappointment at having been cheated out of autumnal serenity, a question arises about the basis of his hope and the extent to which he is responsible for its frustration. So too, from within the indignant demands to see old men’s fear of frenzy exposed, does the poem generate awareness of itself as transgressing to the other extreme. In other words, the syntactical ambiguity facilitates reading the indignation as another form of deception to be guarded against, what *Little Gidding* calls ‘the conscious impotence of rage / At human folly’ (PTSEI, 205).

The latter word, of course, first occurs in *East Coker*. In keeping with the poem’s ironic operations, ‘folly’ is made to bear both negative and positive connotations. The first is the common-sense understanding of folly as foolishness – the ‘blundering frenzy of old men’. But steeped in the bible and Pascal as he was, Eliot knew that folly could also be a wisdom unlike that of the world:

Original sin is folly in the eyes of men, but it is put forward as such.... But this folly is wiser than all men’s wisdom, it is wiser than men. For without it, what are we to

say man is? His whole state depends on this imperceptible point. How could he have become aware of it through his reason, seeing that it is something contrary to reason and that his reason, far from discovering it by its own methods, draws away when presented with it?<sup>1</sup>

Such folly stands in contrast to ‘enchantment’, which in *East Coker II* and elsewhere signals the deception of sin.<sup>2</sup> Folly speaks to an awareness of sin, of being personally implicated and responsible. And from this awareness there is a decisive movement towards self-forgetfulness and grace: ‘belonging to another, to others, or to God’. In this aspect *East Coker* differs from ‘Gerontion’. The early poem, similarly weighed down by an awareness of sin and guilt, resorts to resignation: ‘After such knowledge, what forgiveness?’ But *East Coker* supplements its ‘imperfect humility’ with ‘perfect humility’ by stating the necessity of ‘belonging to God’.<sup>3</sup>

If the speaker here seems to shed his doubleness, to speak directly and under no threat of self-cancellation, it is worth recalling Eliot’s words to More on the subject of belonging to God: ‘I know a little what is the feeling of being alone – I will not say *with* God, but alone in the presence and under the observation of God – with the feeling of being stripped, as of frippery, of the qualifications that ordinarily most identify one: one’s heredity, one’s abilities, one’s *name*.’<sup>4</sup> Such a stripping seems to take place in the last two lines:

The houses are all gone under the sea

The dancers are all gone under the hill. (*PTSEI*, 188)

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<sup>1</sup> Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, 132.

<sup>2</sup> The word occurs severally in Eliot’s essays and poetry. Its clearest link with sin and deception is in *The Family Reunion*, where it occurs twice. It prominently figures in a speech of Agatha’s, which is representative of the play’s central concern: atonement (*CPP*, 333, 348): ‘You may learn hereafter,’ she says to Harry, ‘Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen / To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer.’

<sup>3</sup> For my earlier discussion of imperfect and perfect humility, see Introduction, 21-23.

<sup>4</sup> In Harries, ‘The Rare Contact’, 139, Eliot’s emphasis.

I have already alluded to Ricks's observation that these lines humble the statement about endless humility by having the final word. In light of the letter to More, we may add to this and say that the stridency with which the speaker asserts himself before this point now gives way to dispossession. Where previously 'Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended' or may even be identified by a 'silent motto' (a nod to the Eliot family's *Tace et fac*), they now disappear entirely. Where previously the dancers are given, via Eliot's use of Thomas Elyot and the site of East Coker, ancestral specificity, they are here stripped of identity (*PTSEI*, 185-186). The effacement looks ahead to the poem's conclusion: 'Here or there does not matter' (192).

There is thus still a self-cancellation taking place, only now it is not effected by the poet's relation to himself or his master, but by his relation to God. In this movement of assent, Eliot avoids falling prey to an interminable irony which, as Susan Sontag puts it, is 'eventually checked by despair or by a laugh that leaves one without any breath at all'.<sup>1</sup> By recalling *via* Yeats's criticism and poetry, the petulance, insularity, and fear of belonging in his early work, Eliot meets his criterion for maturity by 'rejecting his own work, [and] passing through the phase of being embarrassed and ashamed'. But by disallowing the late poetry itself to become a form of 'deliberate hebetude' or the complacent wisdom of an older man, Eliot makes *East Coker* itself vulnerable to a degree of embarrassment and shame, disallowing it to adopt the complacency of the 'ironic temper'. The endlessness of humility thus resides in a continual self-sacrifice which must nonetheless always be fulfilled by the truth of belonging to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin, 1966), 34.

## Chapter 6

### *How It Is* and the syntax of penury

Beckett's aim for *How It Is* was clear to him even during its stuttering incipience: 'to find the rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness, penury perhaps I should say' (*L3*, 211). With the weight he attached to the word 'perhaps', the qualification seems crucial.<sup>1</sup> Stripped of narrative convention, relayed by an unnamed narrator, and set in a lightless mudscape, the tale is indeed one of penury. Deprivation is ubiquitous: the narrator has suffered the loss of his learning, the loss of his wife, and even the loss of his dog, Skom Skum. He encounters a fellow-creature, Pim, only to be abandoned. Readers, too, are forced to do without: the text's gasped fragments are bereft of punctuation and narrative footholds. What kindly markers there appear to be soon betray their status as 'ill-said' (*HII*, 3): the three-part schema offers only a mirage of temporal linearity, while the narrator's authority as one describing 'how it is' is undermined by repeated confessions that he catches only every few words uttered by a voice within and without.

Much has been made of the phrase 'syntax of weakness'. This shibboleth of Beckett's failing art has enjoyed critical currency ever since Lawrence Harvey relayed it in 1970, and has been read in relation to Beckett's language, ethics, and aesthetic non-conformity.<sup>2</sup> My interest, however, lies with the suggestiveness of the afterthought quoted above, 'rhythm and syntax of penury'. It aligns with Beckett's declared desire for an '[i]mpoverished form in keeping with revelation & espousal of mental poverty' (*L4*, 593). It anticipates his realisation 'that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in

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<sup>1</sup> 'The key word in my plays is "perhaps".' Tom Driver, 'Interview with Beckett', in Graver and Federman, *The Critical Heritage*, 244.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 249. See also: Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*, 82-83; Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 207-211; Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: The Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006), 90.

subtracting rather than in adding'.<sup>1</sup> Most importantly, it configures within a deliberate winnowing of form, of content, and of the interconnectedness between the new work and the old.

Apart from chiming with Beckett's statements about impoverishment, the phrase 'syntax of penury' is useful in telescoping a slippage related to discrete aspects of his writing. Empirically, we might say that 'syntax of penury' is neglected because it occurs just twice in recently published letters describing the composition of *How It Is*, and that in both cases it is preceded by the better known 'syntax of weakness'. Conceptually, I want to hazard, it is neglected because 'weakness' and 'penury' invite consolidated understanding, as does Beckett's perhaps too-famous characterization of his work as centrally concerned with 'impotence, ignorance'. What is lost in such an elision is the separation of means and ends. Weakness (weaker cousin of impotence) is a teleological concern for Beckett, the apotheosis of creativity: 'to be an artist is to fail' (*PTD*, 144). It is this ideal that drives his work 'worstward'. But what facilitates this drive is an ascetic practice. And as much as weakness and penury seem complementary, they are also involved in a process of self-cancellation (also discussed in Chapter 5) that stands at the heart of a humility cultivated by humiliation. The question, then, is this: how does penury propel Beckett's art towards an impotence that is never finally attained? Or, more cynically, can penury be used without turning loss into gain?

The categorical difference between penury and weakness is not always distinct in Beckett's writing. In *Three Dialogues*, co-authored with Georges Duthuit in 1948, B expresses the extreme vision for a kind of art that is 'unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving' (*Dis*, 141). The claim has something in common with Moran's haughtiness in abjection, discussed in Chapter 4.<sup>2</sup> Like Moran, who

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 352.

<sup>2</sup> See Ch 4, 164-166.

will not condescend to depend on others, B's ideal art is too proud in its poverty to enter into relationality, into a *syntax*. Witness Beckett's desire for an absolute, 'ultimate penury':

All have turned wisely tail, before the ultimate penury, back to the mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal stale bread for their starving brats. There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these esteemed commodities. The one is a predicament, the other not. (*Dis*, 143)

Two years later, Beckett drew a sharp line between deprivation and incapacity:

[T]here is not having and there is not being able to, perhaps too much of a tendency to think of them as standing together. The poor are able to, rather. Not even poor, that is what we have to bear, not even poor and yet not able to.... Treasures of poverty, maybe; but of impotence, no, we shall do without treasures. (*L2*, 195)

These words speak presciently to the rhythm and syntax of penury in *How It Is* – a novel obsessively concerned with the riches and deprivations of knowledge, with the waning of relations. 'Treasures of poverty' belongs to Beckett's storehouse of poor allusions, evoking the parable in the Gospel of Matthew (13:44-46) of the man who sells all his possessions in order to buy a hidden treasure (the kingdom of heaven). Beckett's oxymoronic phrase condenses the problem implicit in a syntax of penury: learning that demonstrates an awareness of its own vanity still remains learning. The incorporation of ascetic or apophatic writings is not a sufficient measure for a poetics of ignorance or a syntax of penury, since it still results in some form of enrichment: the text accrues semiotic significance, while the author courts literary pedigree by association.<sup>1</sup> The same may be said of intratextual relations within the same oeuvre. Bersani and Dutoit call this 'narcissistic concentration': a mode of

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<sup>1</sup> As Matthew Feldman argues, a similar paradox inheres in Beckett's drive to return to ignorance: '[I]gnorance assumes "ignorance of something"; that is, *some* knowledge of the very thing having "unknown" as a property. Both the word and idea "ignorance" simply cannot be self-contained: how such ignorance? ignorance *of what*? Seeking knowledge implies ignorance, just as seeking ignorance implies knowledge.' Feldman, *Beckett's Books*, 5.

‘self-dispersal, as the simultaneous confirmation *and* loss of identity in a potentially endless process of inaccurate self-replications’.<sup>1</sup> Just as allusion may be a way of affirming traditional belonging (‘tradition’ here in Eliot’s sense), so self-referentiality may entrench an author’s canonicity.

John Updike’s 1964 *New Yorker* review of *How It Is* was alive to this possibility. Parodying the novel’s style, the young American expressed the view that *How It Is* piggybacked on the achievement of Beckett’s earlier work: ‘something undergraduate inert a neo-classicism in which one’s early works are taken as the classics a laziness in which young urgencies become old rhetoric hermetic avant-gardism unviolated by the outer world the world beyond the skin.’<sup>2</sup> The indictment is ambiguous. On the one hand, Updike seems to suggest that complacency had crept into Beckett’s art. On the other hand, his gripe appears to be with the institution that had sprung up around the writer. The impersonal and passive construction – ‘one’s early works are taken as classics’ – hints at critical canonization rather than self-appraisal, though it unfurls in an accusation of complacent rehashing that hardly exculpates the author. Competitive strife aside, Updike’s review perspicaciously responds to the pitfalls of Beckett’s becoming Beckettian.

Beckett himself was not insensitive to the danger. Shortly after receiving the first chapter of Martin Esslin’s forthcoming *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1960, he gave vent to his misgivings about ‘critical’ interpretations of his work.<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Barbara Bray, he wryly records from Esslin’s chapter the ‘usual liminal reference to my right hand bowling, left hand batting and scrum halving – the popular oaf. This I know makes all clear and Pim mud = Portora playing fields’ (*L3*, 358). The word ‘usual’ is telling. By the time of ‘Pim’s mud’ – that is, the publication of *Comment C’est* in 1961 – the number of scholarly works

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> John Updike, ‘Review of *How It Is*’, in Graver and Federman, *The Critical Heritage*, 285.

<sup>3</sup> In his exchange of insults with Vladimir, Estragon lands a triumphant blow with ‘Crritic!’ (*CDW*, 70).

had started tallying up. Federman's and Fletcher's meta-critical survey, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics*, documents the following statistics for publications by 1961: four monographs dedicated solely to Beckett; 31 books with partial focus; two doctoral theses and two master's dissertations; one special journal issue; dozens of academic articles and high-profile reviews.<sup>1</sup> The catalogue is not meant to suggest that *How It Is* constitutes a response to the enterprise of Beckett studies, only that the novel was written against the backdrop of a rapidly growing body of scholarship of which Beckett was aware.<sup>2</sup> And though impossible to quantify, such awareness must nonetheless be assumed to colour the composition of a text which so obsessively echoes his earlier works.

*How It Is* is dogged by a certain anxiety of influence. Self-consciously, it stands in the shadow, not of Joyce or Proust, but of Beckett's own earlier work and employs something akin to the *kenotic* procedures Harold Bloom identifies in *The Anxiety of Influence*. The term, as discussed in the Introduction, is of theological provenance and pertains to Christ's self-emptying of his divine nature upon becoming human.<sup>3</sup> In a literary context it constitutes a 'movement towards discontinuity with the precursor' – in this case, Beckett's younger self.<sup>4</sup> By pursuing *kenosis*, the writer submits to a form of self-abnegation leading to humility. He empties himself of 'his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood'. Understood in less grandiloquent terms, the writer questions and confronts the poetics or preoccupations that have conferred literary authority. For Beckett, this might mean questioning and confronting 'impotence' and 'ignorance' as the basis of his art, no less his fame.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Federman and John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics: An Essay in Bibliography* (London: University of California Press, 1970), 113-237.

<sup>2</sup> This awareness is borne out in letter of 1958 (*L3*, 177): 'I feel I'm getting more and more entangled in professionalism and self-exploitation and that it would be really better to stop altogether than to go on with that. What I need is to get back into the state of mind of 1945 when it was write or perish. But I suppose no chance of that.'

<sup>3</sup> See Introduction, 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 14-15.



Another suggestive if uneven theoretical analogue is ‘late style’. The term was coined in Theodor Adorno’s essay, ‘Beethoven’s Late Style’ (1937), and later developed by Edward Said. For Adorno, lateness is defined in contradistinction to the harmony and reconciliation one might normally associate with maturity. ‘As a rule, [late works] are not well rounded, but wrinkled, even fissured.’<sup>1</sup> The mature phase of important artists is typified by a mode of self-interrogation in which the conventions, expectations, and accomplishments of earlier work come under pressure. Developing Adorno’s line of thought, Said argues that lateness constitutes ‘a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communications with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it’.<sup>2</sup>

*How It Is* is neither plainly ‘kenotic’ nor typically ‘late’. While its self-reflexivity has a revisionist quality, it also partakes (like *East Coker*) in an irreducible ironic doubleness which disallows interpreting the work for or against, in-line with or opposed to earlier writing. There is no simple antagonism, nor a straightforward continuity. On the one hand, Beckett saw the novel as an ‘attempt to go from where [*Texts for Nothing*] left me off’ (L3, 229), which work in turn was seen as the ‘afterbirth’ of *The Unnamable* (L2, 300). (In the margin of a late draft of *How It Is*, Beckett even established explicit connections with Molloy and Malone).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, critics have quite reasonably read the novel as the start of a new phase. H. Porter Abbott largely agrees with the ‘many who have seen in *How It Is* not only a major departure but a turning point in Beckett’s art’.<sup>4</sup> William Allen argues that the

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedeman; trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, fwd. Mariam C. Said; intro. Michael Wood (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 8. Arthur Rose’s recent book posits the dialogue between late and middle Beckett as a form of cynicism produced under the sign of advanced capitalism; it is a dialogue which secures the continued commodification of an already-established artist’s work. Arthur Rose, *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Édouard Magessa O’Reilly, ‘Preface’, in *How It Is*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> H. Porter Abbott, ‘Beginning again: the post-narrative art of *Texts for nothing* and *How It Is*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111.

very title – no longer eponymous – signals an exhaustion of earlier approaches.<sup>1</sup> And Maurice Blanchot, one of the text's first and keenest readers, recognized that the novel subjects the operation of reading itself to a divestment of its usual apparatus: 'we find justified in Beckett's case the disappearance of every sign that would merely be a sign for the eye. Here the force of seeing is no longer what is required; one must renounce the domain of the visible and of the invisible, renounce what is represented, albeit in negative fashion. Hear, simply hear.'<sup>2</sup>

The concern of this chapter is not to argue for or against continuity with Beckett's earlier work. Rather, it is to explore a scepticism in *How It Is* which looks askance both at old foundations and new turnings. Put differently, I ask how the novel adopts an interrogative relation to Beckett's earlier work while maintaining a self-reflexive suspicion of its own operations. This chapter considers three aspects of *How It Is*: its impoverished style, its ironic cannibalism of earlier works, and a self-critical use of allusion. A further aim is to suggest a softening of the sometimes dogmatic aesthetic views Beckett espoused about the relation (or non-relation) between the artist and the object of art. Such a softening sees the absolute terms 'impotence' and 'insuperable indigence' relativized as weakness and penury; relativized, because the two latter terms enter into a 'syntax' that is denied by the former. This is not to say that Beckett abandons his project, only that the project itself is interrogated. If humility for Eliot is 'endless' ('end' as *telos* and cessation), humility for Beckett is foundationless. And on this view, weakness and penury facilitate humility in their resistance to a writing that has the potential to become what it opposes: a totalizing poetics.

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<sup>1</sup> William S. Allen, *Aesthetics of Negativity: Blanchot, Adorno, and Autonomy* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 235.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 329.

### **Rhythm of penury: Beckett's caesurae**

In matters of linguistic style, Watt and the narrator of *How It Is* appear to be cut from the same cloth. Watt speaks 'with scant regard for grammar, for syntax, for pronunciation, for enunciation, and very likely, if the truth were known, for spelling too' (W, 133). Bom – one name given to the narrator for the sake of 'commodity' (HII, 52) – murmurs into the mud with little regard for punctuation, at least as far as the reader's eye can tell. In both cases we are asked to acknowledge the artificial relationship between the written and the spoken word. Incorrect spelling cannot be heard, nor can the absence of punctuation. And yet attentiveness to lacunae seems vital for any appreciation of the 'rhythm of penury' in *How It Is*.

Blanchot's injunction to 'simply hear' was serendipitously pre-empted by the text's first issue into the world. More than a year before the publication of *Comment C'est*, a snippet in English was performed by the actor who rendered Beckett's 'moans & groans like [none]' (L4, 392), Pat Magee. Prior to the event, Beckett tried to prepare Magee for the idiosyncrasy of the work: 'What will meet your disgusted eye is a series of short paragraphs...separated by pauses during which panting cordially invited and without as much punctuation as a comma to break the monotony or promote understanding' (L3, 306). The letter adumbrates the oral character of Bom's words: they are 'gasps from my pen' suitably thought of as a 'microphone text'.

Though Beckett sent Magee a script containing 'marks to facilitate understanding' (L3, 315), the published versions make no such concessions. Apart from typographical breaks, spaces between words (as James Williams argues), and the strategic use of capitals, *How It Is* is devoid of punctuation.<sup>1</sup> This sparseness, Édouard O'Reilly remarks in his preface to the text (HII, ix), was not intended from the beginning. Early drafts mimicked the style of *The Unnamable* in its use of lengthy sentences interspersed with commas. It was only after

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<sup>1</sup> James Williams, 'Beckett Between the Words: Punctuation and the Body in the English Prose,' *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 24 (2012): 250.

the fourth draft that a deliberate paring back of punctuation took place and that the isolated fragments emerged as units of breath. The eventual work, as Beckett knew from the beginning, was heavily indebted to a ‘demolishing process’ (L3, 230).

While a systematic lessening was already part of Beckett’s creative process, Adorno may have exerted an ambient influence on the ascetic use of punctuation in *How It Is*. In November of 1958 – a month prior to the first etchings of *Comment C’est* – he gave Beckett a signed copy of his most recent publication, *Noten zur Literatur*. It bore a formal but friendly inscription and contained what would become a celebrated essay on *Endgame*.<sup>1</sup> It also carried a lesser-known piece called ‘Punctuation Marks’ (*Satzzeichen*), which presents aphoristic reflections on its titular subject. Adorno opens by declaring that punctuation marks have an autonomy that extends beyond the syntax in which they are anchored. In a proto-Victor Borgean way, he suggests that they are the models for traffic lights and that each has a distinctive ‘physiognomic status’.<sup>2</sup> With greater earnest, he argues that punctuation marks have undergone an unmooring from both the written and the spoken word by which their artificiality becomes apparent. Language must become ‘distrusting [of] them’:

For through their logical-semantic autonomy, punctuation marks, which articulate language and thereby bring writing closer to the voice, have become separate from both voice and writing, and they come into conflict with their own mimetic nature. An ascetic use of punctuation marks attempts to compensate for some of that. In every punctuation mark thoughtfully avoided, writing pays homage to the sound it suppresses.<sup>3</sup>

Adorno’s quiet urging to interrogate the ornamental function of punctuation might have reminded Beckett of his own scepticism about language in 1937. ‘Grammar and style,’ he exclaimed in his well-known ‘German letter’ to Axel Kaun, had ‘become as irrelevant as a

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<sup>1</sup> See the title page in Beckett’s copy of *Noten zur Literatur*, BDL, [www.beckettarchive.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/library/ADO-NOT.html](http://www.beckettarchive.org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/library/ADO-NOT.html), visited on 1 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 91.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 97.

Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman' (*LI*, 518).<sup>1</sup> So, too, had the mimetic compulsions of writing. While the visual arts and music had respectively been liberated from representation and tonality, there seemed to be something 'paralysingly sacred contained within the unnature of the word' (*LI*, 518). Admittedly, the concerns of the letter are broader than those of Adorno's essay and raise, *avant la lettre*, the doubts of deconstruction. But as an artist, Beckett was always interested in aesthetics over philosophy.<sup>2</sup> When he asks whether there is 'any reason why that terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface should not be dissolved', the question applies to creation, and his point of reference is a creative work. The 'big black pauses' of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony are proffered as an ideal, because they make sound and signification subservient to silence.

Adorno was also an admirer of Beethoven's symphonic silences. In the same year as Beckett's letter, he published the seminal essay, '*Spätstil Beethovens*' ['Beethoven's Late Style'], whose broad thesis I have outlined above. When Adorno turns to Beethoven's case specifically, he makes the following claim:

The caesurae, however, the abrupt stops which characterize the latest Beethoven more than any other feature, are those moments of breaking free; the work falls silent as it is deserted, turning its hollowness outwards. Only then is the next fragment added, ordered to its place by escaping subjectivity and colluding for better or worse with what has gone before; for a secret is shared between them, and can be exorcized only by the figure they form together.... He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As a dissociative force he tears them apart in time, perhaps in order to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1982, while Ruby Cohn was putting together the prose pieces of what became *Disjecta*, Beckett urged her to consider omitting this letter to Kaun, which he referred to as '[e]mbarrassing kitchen German bilge' (*L4*, 578).

<sup>2</sup> Witness Beckett's response to those who sneered at his appreciation of Schopenhauer: 'Everyone laughs at that.... But I am not reading philosophy, nor caring whether [Schopenhauer] is right or wrong or a good or worthless metaphysician. An intellectual justification of unhappiness – the greatest that has ever been attempted – is worth the examination of one who is interested in Leopardi & Proust rather than in Carducci & Barrès' (*LI*, 32-33).

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, *Beethoven*, 126.

Despite not having known Adorno's essay in 1937, there is in Beckett's letter a shared appreciation of violent sundering and silences. Beckett wishes to 'drill one hole after another' into language, while Adorno is intent on examining the 'fissures' of late styles; both writers perceive a 'nothingness' or 'hollowness' that might be drawn out through caesurae. And both arguments, in varying degrees, are spectred by Pascal's awe before the 'eternal silence of these infinite spaces'.<sup>1</sup>

Beckett's preoccupation with caesurae was persistent. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Belacqua asserts his 'strong weakness...for the epic caesura' (144) and sees unexploited possibilities in 'more nervous treatment' of the device. He also admires St Paul's desire for existential interruption, Horace's praise of the hiatus between seasons, and Beethoven's 'punctuation of dehiscence' (139). *More Pricks than Kicks* ironically relays Belacqua's belief that he 'lived a Beethoven pause' (32), and later showcases his death as something similar: '[Belacqua's] body was between them on the bed like the keys between nations in Velasquez's *Lances*, like the water between Buda and Pest, and so on, hyphen of reality' (171). And in *Eleutheria*, Glazier entreats the Spectator to 'have pity on those who dwell in the thick darkness' which is likened to 'the eternal silence of Pascal's infinite spaces' (137).<sup>2</sup> These examples suggest the expansive nature of Beckett's 'nervous treatment' of the caesura. It includes a prosodic understanding ('the heart of the metre missing a beat', as Belacqua puts it [*Dream*, 144]) but also a more abstract notion in which death or even the human body may serve as disruptive silence.

*How It Is* unites this duality. The text's panting rhythm necessitates awareness of Bom's physical panting. Similarly, in order to 'hear' his words, the reader must also 'hear' the paradoxical silence which is a condition of their being heard: we only learn 'how it was how it is when the panting stops' (18). The text, thus, is pervasively caesural: while the white

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<sup>1</sup> Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, 73.

<sup>2</sup> These words also echo 1 Kings 8:12.

spaces allow a more traditional relenting (the reader's eye rests, Bom regains his breath), the running text implies a suspension of respiratory function. This, perhaps, is no different from conventional uses of the device. Take for example the standstill at the heart of *Paradise Lost*:

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour  
Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:  
Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat  
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,  
That all was lost.<sup>1</sup>

Eve's bite into the fruit is followed by a terminal caesura which separates a moment's voluptuous surrender from the surrender of eternity, which is further cleft by delaying the main verb. In the next line the natural order is already out of joint, and the comma exposes earth's 'wound' more glaringly. Yet, while the two caesurae are rhythmically apposite to the loss of paradise, they do not themselves bring about any loss. In fact, they assist in rendering the poetry's force. *How It Is*, by contrast, implicates caesurae in an actual loss of content. It should be remembered that the 'quaqua' Bom hears within and without is a steady stream; what we see is only what he manages to catch when the panting stops, which might be 'a third two fifths or every word' (79). To deepen the loss, this minimum of content is 'murmur[ed]...in the mud' to no audible effect.

Text and white space thus assume different caesural functions that bring about an irresolvable tension between legibility and audibility. In Steven Connor's imaginative turn of phrase: 'The unpunctuated text enjoins from the hard-of-hearing eye a constant process of auditory sieving, or decanting of utterance.'<sup>2</sup> *How It Is* thus sustains warring phenomenological experiences of itself. As a work to be read, its typography visually

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. and intro. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 228, ll. 780-784.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Connor, "'Was that a Point": Beckett's Punctuation', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 277.

determines textual interruptions or ‘silences’. But as a work to be heard, the white spaces become audible as panting while the textual articulations constitute breathless silence. Neither of these is compatible with Magee’s performance, which necessarily transgressed both the logic of reading and of hearing: in panting between fragments he ‘read’ what was not there, and in reading the fragments he voiced what, within the restrictions of the narrative, cannot be heard. Ultimately, there is no ideal rendering of the novel because, as Blanchot remarked, traditional reading ‘risks betraying the still unaccomplished movement to which one should respond’.<sup>1</sup> In its perspectival indeterminacy, the caesura as aporia compares to the scientific phenomenon of complementarity in which either waves or particles are observed though never simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Both as white space and as text, the caesura becomes a cipher that declares a conditional loss, the condition being the preference given to either the written or the spoken word.

Despite the absence of traditional punctuation, Beckett also employs the caesura in a very concrete way by using words themselves as punctuation – a phenomenon Christopher Ricks has also commented on.<sup>3</sup> Consider the following example: ‘one can’t go on one goes on as before can one ever stop put a stop that’s more like it one can’t go on one can’t stop put a stop’ (*III*, 78). The words are doubly self-conscious: first, as an echo of perhaps the most famous phrase in Beckett’s work (‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’ [*TN*, 407]); second, as unpunctuated writing. What is striking about this reiteration of *The Unnamable*’s final words is that the conclusion of that novel is opened to the ‘aporetics’ which it professes to pursue from the outset. Bom’s unpunctuated flow of words moves from statement (‘one can’t go on’) to question (‘can one ever stop[?]’). The despairing note sounded by this question is cut short by an imperative to enforce some kind of end (‘put a stop’), while the self-

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<sup>1</sup> Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 328.

<sup>2</sup> Molloy is scientifically up-to-date (*TN*, 27): ‘Yes, even then, when already all was fading, waves and particles, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names.’

<sup>3</sup> Ricks, *Dying Words*, 86-87.



congratulatory ‘that’s more like it’ hints at pride taken in the resolve behind the imperative rather than in any actual achievement. Neither aim is fulfilled: no stop can be put to Bom’s interminable existence, nor can a telegraphic ‘stop’ – that is, a full stop – be put into place that might suggest both momentary rest and some kind of authorial control.<sup>1</sup> Both the locutionary and illocutionary acts are at odds with the perlocutionary act. In other words, the intended meaning (self-imperative to make a visible full stop) coincides with the implied meaning (punctuation that effects a pause is necessary here), but both are thwarted by the effect of the speech act itself (in wording the punctuation mark, the punctuation mark is nullified, and so too is the silence it must bring about). Thus where *The Unnamable* does punctuate its final irreducibility (‘in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.’), *How It Is* does not allow even the respite of a knife-edge.

Another instance of word-punctuation is the three-times repeated use of ‘parenthesis’. In both its general sense – an aside, a parenthetical remark – and in its specific sense (as rounded bracket), the word signals a disruption in the narrative. In ‘Punctuation Marks’, Adorno holds Proust up as model exponent because his parenthetical sentences make visible the divide between non-reflexive narration and its opposite. They become ‘memorials to the moments when the author, weary of aesthetic illusion and of the self-contained quality of events which he is after all only making up, openly takes the reins’.<sup>2</sup> Beckett similarly calls attention to ‘aesthetic illusion’ but goes further in eliminating the visual markers that allow for an easy separation between the ‘main’ and interrupted narrative.

The first two uses of ‘parenthesis’ presents a particular problem due to their mutual proximity and shared context. Bom has just succeeded in making Pim responsive to his first series of Pavlovian stimuli and is about to introduce the second when he announces his

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Beckett’s telegram to *The Times* upon being asked to submit his resolutions and hopes for the approaching new year of 1984: ‘RESOLUTIONS COLON ZERO STOP PERIOD HOPES COLON ZERO STOP BECKETT’ (*LA*, 626).

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 96.

parenthetical thought: ‘I am not a brute as I may have said before access to the sack that I have my left hand enters [the sack] gropes for the opener here a parenthesis’ (*HII*, 56). Eleven fragments later the word occurs again, but this time mention of the can-opener follows rather than precedes it: ‘thump on skull the cries cease it’s mechanical end of first lesson second series rest and here parenthesis / this opener where put it when not needed’ (57). In both cases, ‘here’ suggests an almost editorial scrupulousness and invites a punctuated reading: ‘my left hand enters gropes for the opener (...) this opener where put it’. But such a bridging effort is undermined by the fact that the opener is already out and being used by the time the second ‘parenthesis’ occurs. Nor is an easy solution offered by thinking of the ‘parenthesis’ as rhetorical device, since the whole novel reads as a patchwork of interludes and interjections, ‘scraps...ill-heard ill-murmured ill-heard ill-recorded...a gibberish garbled sixfold’ (117). Waiting for the clear closure of the parenthesis is on a par with waiting for Godot.

It is worth noting parenthetically that *Rough for Theatre II* – another work of the late 1950s – also exploits the caesural effect of parentheses as punctuation. In the passage below, B reads from the testimony of C’s estranged wife and shifts between his own clerical drone, Mrs Aspasia Budd-Crocker’s cold and impersonal remembrance, and the latter’s more impassioned parenthetical interjections:

I quote: ‘Questioned on this occasion’ – open brackets – ‘(judicial separation)’ – close brackets – ‘regarding the deterioration of our relations, all he could adduce was the five or six miscarriages which clouded’ – open brackets – ‘(oh through no act of mine!)’ – close brackets – ‘the early days of our union and the veto which in consequence I had finally to oppose’ – open brackets – ‘(oh not for want of inclination!)’ – close brackets – ‘to anything remotely resembling the work of love...’. (*CDW*, 239)

With many other convoluted and interrupted sentences such as the one above, it is perhaps unsurprising that this is one of Beckett's least performed plays.<sup>1</sup> The effect on an audience of B's pedantic exactitude is one of utter bafflement. Far from clarifying its meaning, his insistence on announcing parenthetical material as such obscures the thrust of the letter. But lest one think that parenthetical phrases present problems to the hearer alone, Beckett turns the tables on B, the reader, himself:

‘...morbidly sensitive to the opinion of others at the time, I mean as often and for as long as they entered my awareness –’ What kind of Chinese is that? [...] ‘...for as long as they entered my awareness, and that in either case, I mean whether such on the one hand as to give me pleasure or on the contrary on the other to cause me pain, and truth to tell–’ Shit! Where’s the verb! (243)

In a fine twist of irony, B must sacrifice his pedantism and subject a number of sub-clauses to caesural suppression in order to make sense of the letter: ‘...morbidly sensitive to the opinion of others at the time...’ – drivél drivél drivél – ‘...I was unfortunately incapable–’.

Returning to *How It Is*, the last example of word-punctuation I want to consider is found in Bom's vicious inscriptions. Deforming Pim's back into a bloodied *tabula*, the tormentor explains his method: ‘from left to right and top to bottom as in our civilisation I carve my Roman capitals’; ‘unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection with the nail of the index until it falls’ (*III*, 60, 61). If the absence of punctuation in *How It Is* constitutes a perverse heterodoxy in writing, the absence of punctuation in Bom's bloody writing is a perverse orthodoxy. As a matter of pragmatism, Bom adheres to early Western writing conventions not only in his use of the Roman alphabet but also in neglecting all forms of punctuation – even the spacing between words. But because his language, whether French or English, is not case-determined like Latin, he has to rely on alternative methods in making

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<sup>1</sup> See Ackerley and Gontarski, *Faber Companion*, 490.

himself understood. His first efforts to extract an account from Pim about his previous existence are marked by an unsettling childlikeness:

...only say this that your life above YOUR LIFE pause my life ABOVE long pause above IN THE in the LIGHT pause light his life above in the light almost an octosyllable come to think of it a coincidence (*III*, 62)

Bom mouths the words as he writes them. And as if playing a guessing game, he pauses so that Pim has time to decipher the sensory impression. With the caesural writing having failed, Bom tries again using different words ('YOUR LIFE HERE BEFORE ME'); the result, however, is 'utter confusion' (63). He next aims at clarity through concision: 'YOUR LIFE ABOVE...two lines only' (65), to which Pim responds by turning around with 'tears in the eyes'. Out of patience, Bom resorts to means of greater severity: 'YOUR LIFE CUNT ABOVE CUNT HERE CUNT'.

Unlike 'stop' and 'parenthesis', the function of 'CUNT' is not as readily caught in signification. But like these punctuation-words, it serves a twofold caesural function. At the prosodic level, all three words signify a halt in the rhythm; surprisingly, 'CUNT' perhaps achieves this no less literally than 'stop' and 'parenthesis' since it comes to take the place of the actual pauses in Bom's writing. On the plane of conflict between audibility and legibility, these words force the reader to violate the momentary silence they enjoin. For obvious reasons, 'CUNT' is the most transgressive of the three word-punctuations. Be that as it may, it is important to not reduce the multivalence of 'CUNT' for reasons of decency by substituting it for euphemisms like expletive, vocative, noun, punctuation mark or even word (these last two ensuring mutual cancellation). It comprises all of these and none of them. By signalling an absence, but also by situating itself within a misogynistic tradition which equates female genitalia with absence, the word signals a nullity at the very point where Pim's extorted 'midget grammar' recalls the 'shaved mound' of Pam Prim, Bom's wife

‘above’ (discussed below). Here, then, is Beckett’s version of the Elizabethan ‘no-thing’ and also a proof of the Democritean mantra he so admired: ‘naught more real than nothing’ (L2, 427).

### **Treasures of poverty I: Thomas à Kempis and the *pretiosa margarita***

At this moment of coerced speech we may identify an imbrication of the rhythm of penury and syntax of penury, allusively understood. The story of Pam Prim is marked not only by a double-caesura (interruption of Bom’s narrative and a disruption of Pim’s silence) but also by the recurrence of an image which here and elsewhere signals lack: the pearl.

Aside from its iteration in *How It Is*, which I explore later, the image of the pearl has notable significance within Beckett’s reading and writing before 1935. In the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, Beckett discovered the *pretiosa margarita* (precious pearl), which he used in *Dream* as a symbol of prized deficiency in art, will, and knowledge, and which would ultimately be made to subserve in a ‘programme of self-sufficiency’ (L1, 257). Cantos 2 and 3 of the *Paradiso* supplied Beckett with two pearls that would feature in his prose and poetry in connection with planetary crepuscule, lunar light, and – most importantly for my purposes – feelings of self-love. A third distinct pearl features in *Proust*, where it ostensibly symbolizes desirable vulnerability and the forfeit of the ego’s safeguards; however, a wider intertextual context shows that this exposure has more to do with self-relation than social relation. As such a terse summary suggests, Beckett’s use for the pearl image was diffuse though not without continuity. What emerges from a detailed consideration of these three ‘pearls’, as I hope to show, is not so much a consolidated pattern of meaning as a coincidental configuration in which a syntax of plenitude – even pride – may be glimpsed, and against which the pearls of *How It Is* can be read.

One of Beckett's most enduring 'treasures of poverty' in this relation is the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. The fifteenth-century devotional text had the dual merit of appealing to Beckett's interest in quietism while also adding to the 'butin verbal' [verbal booty] (*L1*, 93) for his first novel. The *Dream* notebook includes thirty-five snatchings from the *Imitation*, most of which are given either in English or Latin. Entry 595 is one of a handful to be given in both languages: 'a precious margaret [pearl] & hid from many / *pretiosa margarita, a multis abscondita*' (*DN*, 86). Taken from the third book of the *Imitation*, the phrase occurs in a section called 'Of self-denial and the casting away of all selfishness' in which Thomas, assuming the voice of Christ, urges an extreme and abject humility:

I tell thee that thou must buy vile things with those which are costly and great in the esteem of men. For wonderfully vile and small, almost given up to forgetfulness, doth true heavenly wisdom appear, which thinketh not high things of itself, nor seeketh to be magnified upon the earth; many honour it with their lips, but in heart are far from it; it is indeed the *precious pearl*, which is hidden from many.<sup>1</sup>

The passage sources two parables in the Gospel of Matthew (13:44-46): that of the hidden treasure and that of the costly pearl. Both of these are used by Christ to illustrate the worth of heaven over the worth of the world; they are also coloured by the attendant joy of such a spiritual quest. Thomas's gloomy rendering, however, suppresses this hopeful note and inverts the parables' terms of valuation. While Christ's words in the Gospel highlight the desirability of the kingdom of heaven, the Christ of Thomas's imagining highlights heaven's undesirability from a worldly perspective. In a Pauline toppling of values, the precious pearl becomes something 'wonderfully small and vile' as Thomas substitutes the Matthian promise

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 309.

of attainment for a project of divestment.<sup>1</sup> Another key difference in the *Imitation* is that the precious pearl no longer relates to the kingdom of heaven, but rather to heavenly wisdom. This wisdom, according to Thomas, ‘thinketh not high things of itself, nor seeketh to be magnified upon the earth’.<sup>2</sup> The nuance implies a shift from eschatology to epistemology that Beckett is likely to have appreciated, particularly for its emphasis on the limits of human reason.

It is not surprising, then, that *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* invariably situates the ‘precious pearl’ motif in a context where deficiency of some sort is prized. The first and fullest development is seen in Belacqua’s defence of clichés, conversational tags, and phrases aforethought as they occur in speech and writing. Admiring Lucien’s prefabricated saying, ‘Black diamond of pessimism’, Belacqua likens it to the ‘precious margaret’ and the ‘sparkle hid in the ashes’. (This second phrase also occurs in the *Imitation* in a section that identifies humanity’s ability to discern right from wrong as its sole intellectual good.)<sup>3</sup> He then extrapolates from the virtues of the ‘tag and the ready-made’ to the vices of authors who write with calculated style:

You couldn’t experience a margarita in d’Annunzio because he denies you the pebbles and flints that reveal it. The uniform, horizontal writing, flowing without accident, of the man with a style, never gives you the margarita. But the writing of, say, Racine or Malherbe, perpendicular, diamanté, is pitted, is it not, and sprigged with sparkles; the flints and pebbles are there, no end of humble tags and commonplaces. They have no style, they write without style, do they not, they give you the phrase, the sparkle, the precious margaret. (*Dream*, 47-48)

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<sup>1</sup> This pessimist slant might explain Beckett’s attraction to the phrase and, by the same token, his seeming indifference to Augustine’s use of the reference. The *Dream* notebook’s many cullings from *The Confessions* do not include Augustine’s own reference to the ‘goodly pearl’, which occurs in Book 8, from which Beckett took sixteen quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 309.

<sup>3</sup> See Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation*, 340. A corresponding entry is found in Beckett’s *Dream* notebook (86).

Later, Belacqua draws a direct parallel between the precious pearl and the utter abandonment of will ('aboulia of the first water' [184]). He then goes on to value the Alba's '*savoir ne pas faire*' as a 'jewel of great price' (192), forging a link between ideal ignorance and the parable of the hidden treasure. Taken separately, the three instances signify distinct but related shortcomings. The first is a deficit of style, which is consonant with Beckett's efforts to write 'without style' and his consequent decision to undergo the alienation of writing in French.<sup>1</sup> The second is a deficit of will, where the possibility of Nemo's suicide is dismissed on the grounds that it would require volitional action; this anticipates Beckett's espousal of the Geulincxian imperative ('wherein you have no power, therein you should not will'). The third is a deficit of knowledge which attains added lustre by virtue of self-awareness and, as such, approximates the Socratic wisdom of realising one's ignorance.

Despite *Dream*'s pronounced pilfering from Thomas à Kempis, the practice in Beckett's early writing always appears driven by opportunism rather than conviction. Chris Ackerley writes that, though a budding quietist impulse may be glimpsed in these borrowings, 'the prose reflects a delight in language more recondite than reverent'.<sup>2</sup> This literary lop-sidedness is confirmed in Beckett's 1935 letter to Thomas McGreevy, already mentioned in Chapter 2, where he admits both to finding many of the book's sayings attractive but also to his inability to see how its holy aversions could achieve anything but intensify an unhealthy inwardness.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating something of his own '*savoir ne pas faire*', he asks:

Am I to set my teeth & be disinterested? When I cannot answer for myself, and do not dispose of myself, how can I serve? Will the demon – *pretiosa margarita!* – disable me any less with sweats & shudders & panics & rages & rigors & heart burstings

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<sup>1</sup> See Juliet, *Conversations*, 18: 'He chose to write in French because it was a new language to him. It held an air of strangeness, permitting him to escape the reflexes inherent in the use of a mother tongue.'

<sup>2</sup> C. J. Ackerley, 'Samuel Beckett and Thomas à Kempis: The Roots of Quietism', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 9 (2000): 82.

<sup>3</sup> See Ch 2, 71.



because my motives are unselfish & the welfare of others my concern? Macché! Or is there some way of devoting pain & monstrosity & incapacitation to the service of a deserving cause? (*L1*, 258, my italics)

The context suggests that ‘demon’ is shorthand for Beckett’s struggles with anxiety, melancholy, and bad health. Not oblivious to this self-portrait of the artist as a tortured soul, he equates his hauntings with the ‘*pretiosa margarita*’. The ironic gesture sums up his earlier confession that the *Imitation* had been meretriciously used: ‘I know that now I would be no more capable of approaching its hypostatics & analogies “meekly, simply & truly”, than I was when I first twisted them into a programme of self-sufficiency’ (*L1*, 257). As a symbol of privation transformed into plenitude, the *pretiosa margarita* may reasonably be assumed to figure within this programme.

### **Treasures of poverty II: Dante and Proust**

A similar categorization may be made of one of *Dream*’s other stolen pearls. *Paradiso* 2 supplied Beckett with the ‘eternal pearl’ (Dante’s metaphor for the moon) which he transferred in a comparatively straightforward manner to Belacqua’s footsore night-wandering (*Dream*, 129-130). But it is the dimly visible pearl of *Paradiso* 3 that features as part of a subtle example of Belacqua’s self-love. In this canto, Dante likens the faces of the First Heaven’s denizens to the faint reflections one might see in a limpid stream or glass. The pilgrim falls into the reverse of Narcissus’ error, supposing the mesmerizing images to be behind him rather than before him:

Even as from polished or transparent glasses,  
or waters clear and still, but not so deep,  
that wholly lost to vision is their bed,  
the features of our faces returned  
so faintly, that upon a pallid brow

a pearl comes no less faintly to our eyes;  
thus saw I many a face that longed to speak;  
I therefore ran into the fault opposed  
to that which kindled love 'tween man and fount.<sup>1</sup>

The passage made a deep impression on Beckett. It stands as the longest translation of Dante in the *Dream* notebook (*DN*, 155-156), while the poem 'To be Sung Loud' and its earlier version, 'From the only Poet to a shining Whore', both contain references to this pearl. In *Dream* the allusion occurs in its fullest form. The reworking is preceded by a mystical description of the Alba's appearance in the evening light. Comparing her dilated pupils to the monochromatic eyes of the small boy in El Greco's *Burial of the Count Orgaz*, Belacqua becomes entranced by the halo of whiteness that radiates behind the supposed object of his affections. Absorbed, he loses himself in her dark eyes:

So that as from transparent polished glass or, if you prefer, from tranquil shining waters, the details of his face return so feeble that a pearl on a white brow comes not less promptly to his pupils, so now he sees her vigilant face and in him is reversed the error that lit love between the man (if you can call such spineless creature a man) and the pool. For she had closed her eyes. (*Dream*, 175)

Despite being a close translation of the nine lines from *Paradiso* 3, the final sentence introduces a significant deviation. While Dante's reverse Narcissus-error is his mistaken belief that there are beings behind him, Belacqua can only be said to succumb to this reversal after first experiencing the Narcissus-error proper. It is only once the Alba has closed her eyes and is seen against the 'albescence evening' that she becomes like the faintly outlined inhabitants of the First Heaven. The implication is that, prior to this moment, Belacqua had gazed so deeply in the pools of her dark eyes that he had fallen in love with the likeness contained in them. Belacqua's navel-gazing, after all, goes undisguised throughout the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Par.*3.10-16.

It is summed up in two ‘propositions’: ‘Love condones...narcissism’ and ‘Love demands narcissism’ (38, 39). Upon his departure, Belacqua muses that the encounter (with himself, through the Alba) has possibly supplied him with ‘copy for his wombtomb’ (175) – that is, further means for self-sufficiency.

*Murphy* also carries a potential reference to these lines from Dante, though more mutedly. Idolizing Mr. Endon as the epitome of indifference to the outside world, Murphy fetishizes this patient’s schizophrenia: ‘[it was] a psychosis so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain’ (*Mur*, 112). Ackerley only credits Ovid’s Narcissus as source, but ‘limpid’ and ‘imperturbable’ may also recall the clear, calm waters of Dante’s simile.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the source, Belacqua and Murphy are alike in casting a gaze that obliterates otherness and relationality. For the former, this gaze reinforces self-love; for the latter, solipsism. Alain Badiou has written that one of the interrogations implicit in Beckett’s work concerns an alterity that may overcome inwardness: ‘[The question] of the *existence of the Two*, or of the virtuality of the Other...ultimately ties together all of Beckett’s work. Is an effective Two possible, a Two that would be in excess of solipsism? We might also say that this is a question of love.’<sup>2</sup> Love is certainly a feature of *Murphy*: there is the love between the protagonist and Celia, the love-triangle between Neary, Wylie, and Miss Counihan, and more. But what stands above all these is Murphy’s love-affair with his own intellect – a fact borne out by the epigraph of the novel’s central chapter. The Latin words ‘*Amor intellectualis quo Murphy se ipsum amat*’ [‘the intellectual love with which Murphy loves himself’] are a corruption of Spinoza’s axiom that ‘God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love’, and thus arrogate to Murphy the pleroma of divine self-sufficiency.<sup>3</sup> As

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<sup>1</sup> C. J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 163.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. and trans. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Ackerley, *Demented Particulars*, 116.

Belacqua sees himself in the Alba's eyes, so Murphy misappropriates the mental illness of Mr. Endon as a mode of self-affirmation.

Another modulated reference to *Paradiso* 3 occurs in 'Le Concentrisme'.<sup>1</sup> Presented to the Modern Language Society at Trinity College Dublin in November 1930, this parodic academic paper offers a psychobiography of the fictional writer Jean du Chas, founder of a movement known as Concentrism. In a paragraph that mentions the subject's fatherless upbringing, his birthdate (the same as Beckett's), and his early resentment of romanticised ideas about twilight, we read that '*il salue le subtil désaccord si souvent et si vainement poursuivi d'un caillou à peine visible contre un front exsangue*' ['he salutes the subtle discord so frequently and so unavailingly sought, of a pebble barely visible against a face drained of blood'] (*Dis*, 37).<sup>2</sup> While there is no intimation of a Narcissus-error, Du Chas is nonetheless depicted as a man whose ties to external reality are of the most tenuous kind. His journal supposedly reveals 'no trace' of a social life. Rather, it gestures at an entrenched disregard for human 'afflictions' such as love, friendship, and fame. The 'radiant note of all his dislocations', we read, is '*to feck off out of it all*'.<sup>3</sup>

While kinship between Du Chas, Belacqua, and Murphy seems a reasonable inference, Beckett's substitution of a white pebble for Dante's pearl would suggest a differently nuanced appropriation. The sentence preceding the salutation of discord between pebble and blanched face provides a suggestive astronomical context. Du Chas finds sunsets exasperating, particularly those that would inspire the 'postcard vulgarity' of the landscape painter. His preference is for an almost imperceptible gradation of colourlessness: 'a leaden twilight which befits a range from wan underpinning to the most radiant pallor of Venus.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Pilling's annotation of Item 1097 in the *Dream* notebook, 156.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Concentrism', trans. Michael Zeleny, accessed 10 Dec 2016, <http://larvatus.livejournal.com/68681.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett, "'Le Concentrisme" and "Jean d Chas": Two Extracts', trans. John Pilling, *Modernism / Modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 883.

<sup>4</sup> 'Concentrism', trans. Michael Zeleny, <http://larvatus.livejournal.com/68681.html>.

This anticipates the ‘*caillou*’ against a similarly shaded background, which has its own stellar connection distinct from that provided by *Paradiso* 3. In *Sodom and Gomorrah*, the fourth volume of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator uses the phrase ‘*caillou aérolithique*’ [‘aerolithic pebble’ / ‘meteoric pebble’]. It occurs in a lengthy reflection on sleep that triggers the experience of a dream reality beyond the reach of ordinary memory. The aerolith is some external stimulus (like a doorbell or a car-horn) that returns us, first, to the sleep which resembles our lives, and then to consciousness. Upon waking from such a sleep, however, there is at first an existential dislocation before the subject makes sense of their surroundings, or even of their own being:

From these deep sleeps we awake in a dawn, not knowing who we are, being nobody, quite new, prepared for anything, our brain finding itself emptied of the past that had hitherto been our life.... Then, from the black storm through which we seem to have passed (but we do not even say *we*), we emerge lying prostrate, without any thoughts: a ‘we’ it may be without content.<sup>1</sup>

Du Chas’s asocial, monadic existence also emerges as a relational collapse: ‘This life...is void, hollow, devoid of content....’<sup>2</sup> Proust’s and Beckett’s French are the same (‘*sans contenu*’), as is their desire for relational breakdown.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the third pearl is found in *Proust*, written in 1929 shortly before ‘Le Concentrisme’. In his often-fustian analysis of memory and habit, Beckett opposes the pearl of true, vulnerable existence and involuntary memory against the shell of habit.

[H]ere, in that ‘gouffre interdit à nos sondes,’ is stored the essence of ourselves, the best of our many selves and their concretions that simplists call the world, the best because accumulated slyly and painfully and patiently under the nose of our vulgarity, the fine essence of a smothered divinity whose whispered ‘disfazione’ is drowned in

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 4: Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. and intro. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 2002), 377. For the French original, see Proust, *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu: Sodome et Gomorrhe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett, ‘Concentrism’, trans. Michael Zeleny, <http://larvatus.livejournal.com/68681.html>.

the healthy bawling of an all-embracing appetite, the pearl that may give the lie to our carapace of paste and pewter. May – when we escape into the spacious annexe of mental alienation, in sleep or the rare dispensation of waking madness. (*PTD*, 31-32)

Apart from its bewildering syntax, the passage is coloured by an allusion about obscurity and also by an obscure allusion. The French is from Baudelaire's poem, 'Le Balcon', and translates as 'the gulf which we cannot sound'.<sup>1</sup> Like Beckett's argument, the poem suggests that a certain essential self belongs to a past which we cannot access consciously; it is only kindled unexpectedly by 'perfumes', 'kisses', and 'sighs'. The obscure allusion – rendered less so by the scholarship of Hatch, Winstanley, and others – is hinted at in the archaic Italian word '*disfazione*'. It occurs in Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks and signifies ruin, destruction, and dissolution, particularly of a natural kind.<sup>2</sup> These allusions to a self or selves arising out of the grit of everyday existence are consolidated in the image of the pearl. The word 'concretions' hints at its natural formation (the concentric layering of calcareous matter), while 'carapace and pewter' suggests the shell inside which the process takes place but which ultimately obscures the pearl within. Despite the convolutions of Beckett's sentence, a clear binary emerges: on the one hand is our essential selves, marked by undoing and likened to a true pearl; on the other hand is the crystallization of a false identity ensconced by habit.

At first glance, *Proust's* pearl seems antithetical to those found in *Dream*. Where the misappropriated gems of the *Imitation* and *Paradiso* signal self-sufficiency and self-love, the true pearl of authentic being invites the crumbling of façade. The question, however, is before whom such an exposed self stands exposed. As mentioned in Chapter 2, *Proust* displays unmitigated antipathy to friendship or intimacy – a syntax between the artist and another

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry*, trans. and ed. T. R. Smith (New York, NY: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 141-142.

<sup>2</sup> See David A. Hatch, "I AM MISTAKEN": Surface and Subtext in Samuel Beckett's "Three Dialogues", *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 13 (2003): 57-71; Adam Winstanley, 'A "Whispered Disfazione": Maurice Blanchot, Leonardo da Vinci and *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 135-160.

human being can only be detrimental to art.<sup>1</sup> Yet even without introducing this position, the passage sufficiently declares an ideal isolationism: the pearl of true existence may only counteract the falsities of habit if the ‘spacious annexe of mental alienation’ is accessed through sleep or insanity. Sleep (whether hypopompic or hypnagogic), as we have seen in the Proustian-inflected ‘Le Concentrisme’, may present a temporary escape from an existence carved out by habit. As for insanity, *Murphy* again provides a correlative, both in glibness and theme. Detesting the ‘big world’ and venerating ‘the little world’ (107), the novel’s hero perversely romanticises the patients of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat as beings liberated from codified social behaviour. Mental illness thus becomes another prized form of want, which falls short of normal cognitive function and consequently achieves rupture with a reality defined by ‘pensums and prizes’ or by the call of ‘*quid pro quo!*’ (*Mur*, 63, 1) – the farce of giving and taking.

### **Treasures of poverty III: forlorn solace**

Turning now to the pearls in *How It Is*, it may be remarked that they betoken quiet sorrow, hollow words of comfort, and a scrap of learning unexpectedly recalled. Collectively they stand in impoverished relation to Beckett’s early pearls. The question is how one should read the return of the expressed after an absence of three decades. Can the motif simply be taken as the persistent echo of the *Imitation*’s lovely sayings, for instance?<sup>2</sup> Or is it implicated in a more searching revisionist process, an ironized rehearsal of earlier rehearsals?

The latter seems implied towards the end of Part I, where mention of a pearl is made during a moment of self-dramatization. With eyes closed, the narrator imagines himself struggling up from his ever-prone position. Not quite erect, he nonetheless manages to lift his head from the mud and mutter something to himself:

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch 2, 80.

<sup>2</sup> See Ackerley, ‘Samuel Beckett and Thomas à Kempis’, 83.

what can one say to oneself possibly at such a time a little pearl of forlorn solace so much the better so much the worse that style only not so cold cheers alas that style only not so warm joy and sorrow those two their sum divided by two and luke like in outer hell (*HII*, 35)

The humour is typically Beckettian. Able to break the silence which is an apparent condition of his damnation, Bom is in two minds about what to say. When the moment of indecision passes, a ‘pearl of forlorn solace’ issues. The phrase is neatly ambiguous. On one level it suggests a failing of memory; Bom is at a loss in recalling a formerly reassuring saying. Another possible interpretation, nuanced by the French original, is that solace of the sort on offer is solace alone to one with a resigned predisposition. *Comment C’est* gives ‘soulas désolé’ (*CC*, 52), which suggests the words provide a sorry or hollow comfort, not unlike the ‘abject self-referring quietism’ Beckett felt drawn to in the *Imitation* (*LI*, 257). In yet a third reading, the ‘pearl of forlorn solace’ may be reproduced though its content is nothing but a vanished hope. Apposite to a place where ‘mute screams [to] abandon hope’ (39) are heard (or not heard), solace itself is forlorn even if the words are recalled.

Comparable instances of negated reassurance are found in the plays on either side of *How It Is*. *Krapp’s Last Tape*, written in 1958, contains the famously voided ‘vision’ that has often been taken to have biographical correlation with Beckett’s realisation that his art was impelled by impotence and ignorance: ‘Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night in March, at the end of the jetty, in the howling wind, never to be forgotten, when suddenly I saw the whole thing. The vision at last’ (*CDW*, 220). The epiphany clearly represents some kind of encouragement during a troubling time, yet its substance is withheld. Just as Krapp the younger is about to reveal the ‘belief’ that had misled him all his life, Krapp the elder impatiently brings the recording to a halt. He winds forward to a point that again brings the voice to the precipice of a revelation (Krapp’s insight into his



‘dark’) only to interrupt it with curses and another silencing of the machine. This ‘mechanized...aposiopesis’, as Dirk van Hulle conceives of it, means that the vision remains hidden from the audience; the substance of the solace is lost.<sup>1</sup>

*Happy Days* also unsettles potentially soothing recollections. ‘What are those wonderful / unforgettable / exquisite / immortal lines?’ Winnie asks variously (CDW, 140, 141, 150, 160, 164, 166). Her effort to remember creates the expectation of a moment’s reassurance in a situation absurdly dire. But this expectation is soon undercut both by the poetry’s subject matter and its fragmented recollection. Lines from Shakespeare, Milton, and other ‘classics’ are brokenly recited, while sufficient content emerges to signal despairing want. There is Ophelia’s lament for Hamlet’s sanity, Adam’s realisation of paradise lost, Thomas Gray’s pining for the innocence of childhood. Perhaps the most poignant half-remembering is that of the poem, ‘Go, Forget Me’, by the Irish poet Charles Wolfe.

Go, forget me – why should sorrow  
O’er that brow a shadow fling?  
Go, forget me, and to-morrow  
Brightly smile and sweetly sing:  
Smile, though I shall not be near thee,  
Sing, though I shall never hear thee [...]<sup>2</sup>

The speaker urges his beloved not to let her future life be marred by his passing. This encouragement to happiness, to joyous song, appears to prompt Winnie’s recollection of the poem. Snatches of verse follow from her reflection on the sadness that follows song, after she has taken consolation from the temporary nature of such sadness:

It does not last of course. [Pause.] That is what I find so wonderful. [Pause.] It wears away. [Pause.] What are those exquisite lines? [Pause.] Go forget me why should

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<sup>1</sup> Dirk van Hulle, *The Making of Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape / La Dernière Bande* (Antwerp: University Press Antwerp, 2015), 173.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Wolfe, ‘Go Forget Me’, in *The Prose and Poetry of Europe and America*, ed. G. P. Morris and N. P. Willis (New York, NY: Leavitt and Allen, 1845), 360.

something o'er that something shadow fling . . . go forget me . . . why should sorrow .  
. . . brightly smile . . . go forget me . . . never hear me . . . sweetly smile . . . brightly  
sing . . . (CDW, 164)

The two 'somethings' that Winnie cannot recall are 'sorrow' and 'brow'. She further makes the mistake of thinking that the personified 'sorrow' might 'brightly smile'. And, instead of the beloved, Winnie puts the speaker in the position of never being heard. These minute misrememberings have the effect of erasing the beloved while preserving sorrow. The double irony is that she recites a lyric which only reinforces the idea of the vanished intimacy experienced after song or after sex.

Bom's, Krapp's, and Winnie's respective pearls of solace stand in contradistinction to wombtombing recitations of Belacqua. In Chapter 2, I mentioned Belacqua's tendency to quote literary works when perceiving a threat to his ego.<sup>1</sup> The recitation of comforting scraps of verse thus insulates him against the outside world. But by the time of Beckett's late writing an ascetic stringency is imposed on his creatures' search for solace. *Krapp's Last Tape* demonstrates that while the younger Krapp might have been seduced by epiphany, the elder Krapp is wary and impatient of it. *Happy Days* does not deny Winnie the pursuit of comfort, but it does deny her its attainment. And *How It Is* shows Bom incapable to dream up or remember any words of comfort even during a flight of fancy.

If the 'pearl of forlorn solace' represents an inability to recall words of comfort, the pearl in Part 2 signals an inability to repress painful memories (*HII*, 66-67). Mention of this pearl occurs during a faint flicker of almost-forgotten learning. In the wake of his anguished interrogation of Pim, Bom is briefly reminded of his 'life above' with his wife, Pam Prim. Though vague, the details of this period are sufficient to suggest that Bom lives with a sense of shame. The first thing we learn about Pam Prim is an intimate detail: she at one point

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch 2, 89-90.

shaved her pubic hair. We also discover that the couple's love-life was on the wane and that they tried to rekindle it through greater daring in the bedroom ('tried to revive it through the arse'). These amorous efforts are cut short by Pam Prim's fall from a window – a possible attempted suicide. She is admitted to hospital with a spinal injury, and during her convalescence forgives Bom for an undisclosed transgression. His recollection of the hospital is marked by motifs of shame: Pam Prim's pudenda ('blue mound strange idea...she must have been dark on the deathbed'), his avoidance of her gaze, and his failure to find the 'holly she begged for'. He only manages to gather the flowers which prompt his etymological recollection: 'marguerites from the latin pearl'.

It is important to remember that the Pam Prim episode is the result of violent extortion: Bom tortures Pim in order to hear him tell of 'the good moments I'll have had up there' (67). Throughout the novel, memory seems to be co-opted into the mudscape's punitive design. In Part 1, seven 'images' are visited upon Bom. These have the appearance of memories or dreams since they involve something of a life above, sometimes point to a younger self, and are often marked by an awareness of different colours. The images are not unpleasant in themselves (excepting perhaps that of a stern mother's gaze), though the forlorn situation in which Bom experiences them aggravates his sense of loss. And as such, they constitute what Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* calls '*Memoria praeteritorum bonorum*' (CDW, 80): the unpleasant experience of recalling times of happiness. Given the connection between memory and pain in *How It Is*, it is unsurprising to find a modified allusion to the love-story of Paolo and Francesca: 'in the rectum a redhot spike that day we prayed no further' (30). The latter phrase is a corruption of 'read no further' and occurs in what Beckett once referred to as Dante's 'imperishable reference to the incompatibility of [reading and

loving]’ (*Dis*, 81) where Francesca reminds the Pilgrim that there is ‘no greater pain / than to remember happy days in days of misery’.<sup>1</sup>

With torments to rival those in the *Inferno*, *How It Is* seems to suggest that there is greater suffering than this. The detail that the couple tried to ‘revive it through the arse’ recalls the context of sexual deviance in Canto 5 through the earlier explicit mention of ‘in the rectum a redhot spike that day we prayed no further’. This earlier phrase is itself revived by the immediate context in which Pim suffers something like a sodomization with the can-opener. And when we take into account that the act of recall and story-telling is both sustaining and mortifying (discussed in more detail below), suffering is experienced even at a biological level. Against such afflictions – shameful memory, physical violation, existential torment – the precious pearl offers no defence, not even a forlorn solace. The banality of the etymological connection between the flowers and the pearl stands in sharp contrast to the fullness offered by Beckett’s earlier uses. Unlike those, which have the luxury of declaring want as an ideal, this instance in *How It Is* speaks to the horror of not having.

### ***Comment C’est – commencez – begin again***

In the following sections I wish to offer another instance of Beckett’s ‘treasures of poverty’ by which intertextuality and ethics are impoverished. The homophonic potential in the title *Comment C’est* has been well noted.<sup>2</sup> The most obvious meaning is captured in its English counterpart, then there are various echoes of the verb *commencer* – infinitive, past participle (*commencé*), imperative (*commencez*). What I want to examine in this section, however, is a corresponding motif built around the notions of beginning, beginning again, and a lingering awkwardness about origins: Darwin’s caterpillar.

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Inf.* 5.121-123.

<sup>2</sup> See Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Faber Companion*, 105.

When Beckett first read Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1932, he was left unimpressed. Writing to Thomas McGreevy, he dismissed the book as 'badly written catlap' and claimed to retain the single fact that 'blue-eyed cats are always deaf' (*LI*, 111).<sup>1</sup> The profession of limited interest was somewhat exaggerated, given that another of the book's scientific observations would be reworked in three texts before its faint limning in *How It Is*.<sup>2</sup> In a chapter on 'Instinct', Darwin relays Pierre Huber's account of the caterpillar's behaviour during the construction of its hammock. Huber noted that if a caterpillar is transplanted from a hammock at an advanced stage of construction to one at an intermediary stage, the insect would proceed from the given product and complete the remaining stages. However, if the caterpillar is taken from a hammock at the middle stage and placed in one at a more advanced stage, it would be at a loss: 'far from feeling the benefit of this, [the caterpillar] was much embarrassed, and, in order to complete its hammock seemed forced to start from the third stage, where it had left off, and thus tried to complete the already finished work.'<sup>3</sup>

Beckett first spun Darwin's caterpillar into the short story, 'Echo's Bones', where Doyle prompts Belacqua to finish the contradiction he had started with 'but'. His interlocutor responds that the conjunction offers little help in trying to remember his argument: 'My memory has gone to hell altogether.... If you can't give me a better cue than that I'll have be like the embarrassed caterpillar and go back to my origins' (*EB*, 42). Nodding to the title of Darwin's *magnum opus*, Belacqua also demonstrates his understanding of Darwinian recall. Habit and instinct, in Darwin's view, are closely aligned, since both are characterized by recurring patterns: 'As in repeating a well-known song, so in instincts, one action follows

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<sup>1</sup> Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon remark that Beckett's initially 'hasty conclusion' about *On the Origin of Species* is balanced by attentive rereadings over subsequent years. Dirk van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 202-204.

<sup>2</sup> See also Beckett's letter of 3 January, 1985, to Joseph Chaikin: '...But I don't mind me. Don't you either. I'll go on soon from where I left off' (*L4*, 649).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 156.

another by a sort of rhythm; if a person be interrupted in a song, or in repeating anything by rote, he is generally forced to go back to recover the habitual train of thought....'<sup>1</sup> In *Murphy*, Miss Counihan also loses her train of thought and is forced to retrace her way to the original point: 'She quite forgets how it goes on...she will have to go right back to the beginning, like Darwin's caterpillar' (*Mur*, 130). And in *Watt*, Mr O'Meldon returns to his premise after interruption but is impatiently urged to 'Go on from where you left off...not from where you began. Or are you like Darwin's caterpillar?' (*W*, 167).

Darwin's caterpillar returns more deeply cocooned in *How It Is*. There is no outright reference as in the earlier instances, only the suggestion of disorienting dislocation and the confused effort to resume:

I know not what insect wound round its treasure I come back with empty hands to me  
to my place what to begin with ask myself that last a moment with that

what to begin my long day my life present formulation last a moment with that coiled  
round my treasure listening my God to have to murmur that (*HII*, 19)

Subtly evocative of the Moroccan prince's unhappy discovery during the casket challenge in *The Merchant of Venice*, these fragments perhaps more readily declare a debt to Shakespeare than to Darwin. Bom's childhood habit of 'scissor[ing] into slender strips the wings of butterflies' [*HII*, 5] also calls the cruelty of Coriolanus' son to mind.<sup>2</sup> But Bom nonetheless shows affinity with the larval members of the lepidopteran order. His existence is marked by a regenerative cycle and, like the caterpillar transplanted to a different hammock, faces with embarrassed uncertainty the question 'what to begin with'. This self-reflexivity parallels his indecision in recalling the 'pearl of forlorn solace', for in both instances there is a groping

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<sup>1</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 156.

<sup>2</sup> See William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Lee Bliss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), I.iii.54-59. See also V.iv.11-14: the comparison between a grub's transformation into a butterfly and Coriolanus' into a dragon is also suggestive in the context of *How It Is*.

after something irrevocable or useless. Bom's 'treasure' is his sack, which supplies him with means of sustenance (tins of sardines), a tool for torture (can-opener), and a form of creature comfort (as pillow and an object to kiss). But in the tribute that lists these qualities, he admits that the sack has lost all value: 'we don't profit by it in any way any more and we cling to it' (56). It has become a treasure of poverty.

What distinguishes Beckett's use of Darwin's caterpillar in *How It Is* from its occurrences in the earlier works is this: the absence of any analogue between the operations of reason and the behaviour of the insect. The earlier instances all build upon Darwin's rationalistic argument: instinct is never purely instinctual but always informed by habit, which in turn is informed by reason or what Darwin thinks of as 'intelligence'. But in *How It Is*, it is Huber's caterpillar that comes more directly into view. That is to say, the thought-inflected appropriation of the caterpillar is jettisoned while its naturalistic aspect is retained. Understood in terms of the metaphor itself, *How It Is* refuses to build upon Darwin's advanced construction, upon his extrapolation from the biological to the rational. Unlike Belacqua and the others, Bom undergoes a phenomenological displacement during which what is lost is not any train of thought but the foundations of instrumental reason itself.

This deprivation inheres in the absence of any epistemic certainty. The mudscape where Bom finds himself is characterized as 'the place without knowledge' (107). Such negation almost renders superfluous his frequent professions of past erudition and precludes attainment of any but the lowest tier in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Loss of knowledge, in turn, is closely allied to notions of a 'loss of species'. The latter is a phrase that occurs almost exclusively in contexts suggestive of a connection between humanity and higher-order cognitive functions such as the use of memory or mathematical calculations. Witness, for instance, the ontological affirmation offered by arithmetic:

dear figures when all fails a few figures to wind up with part one before Pim the golden age the good moments the *losses of species* I was young I clung on to the

species we're talking of the species the human saying to myself brief movements no sound two and two twice two and so on (*HII*, 39, my emphasis)

The safety of numbers is a familiar Beckettian trope: Molloy deepens his self-knowledge by calculating his farts per day; the Unnamable finds 'nothing more restful than arithmetic' (*TN*, 26, 381); and the speakers of 'Enough' regard mental calculations as a form of escape (*CSP*, 188). In like manner, Bom attempts to resist the hopelessness of his situation by doing small sums. But 'dear figures' is implicated in the same logic of penury as the pearl of forlorn solace, and 'clung' belongs to a distant past. What restores him to the species in this realm is not arithmetic or even its memory but the act of slaking his thirst: 'what to begin with drink to begin with I turn over on my face...the tongue comes out lolls in the mud...the face in the mud the mouth open the mud in the mouth thirst abating humanity regained' (*HII*, 21). Far from the rationalistic assurances of the *cogito*, Bom's 'great categories of being' (9) are reduced to mere bodily functions: I drink therefore I am.<sup>1</sup> Grimly, such reduction shadows Robert Antelme's reflection that the dehumanization of the concentration camps 'provoke[d] an almost biological claim of belonging to the human race'.<sup>2</sup>

Suspended between animal life (*zoē*) and human being (*bios*), between vital needs and a vestige of the rationality, Bom is seen to inhabit a state of indeterminacy. He compares with Agamben's werewolves, bandits, and *muselmänner* in being outside the parameters of the *polis* yet still under its dictates. 'The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man', Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*,

is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the

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<sup>1</sup> The French version renders 'great categories of being' as 'grandes catégories d'existence' (*CC*, 12) which more clearly foregrounds the ontological reduction Bom undergoes: existence not only precedes essence but also remains when essence is stripped back.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston, IL: The Marlboro Press, 1998), 6.



werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.<sup>1</sup>

In these terms, Bom suffers a reduction of *bios* (the politics, culture, and learning which make him human) while still standing under the laws that govern biopolitics. So the paradox may be maintained, as Jean-Michel Rabaté has also remarked, that the creatures have their ‘being in justice’ while being ontologically lessened to the ‘piss of being’ (*HII*, 108, 115).<sup>2</sup> And if we consider that the thirst-quenching mud is ‘nothing more than all our shit’ (44), then ‘hanging on to the species’ equals nothing less than a humiliating dehumanization.

Given such conditions, the species in question is perhaps not human after all. Bom likens the movement between torturers and victims to the ‘migration of slime-worms...or [a] tailed latrinal scissiparous frenzy’ (*HII*, 98). The French gives ‘*vers de vase*’ (*CC*, 144) – a type of insect belonging to the order *chironomidae* whose larvae are often found in sewage.<sup>3</sup> Like caterpillars, slime-worms eventually transform into a winged insect; unlike butterflies, however, the winged insect is habitually parasitised. Within a context where the suffering of one creature sustains another, such metamorphosis seems apt. But there is no suggestion that this change occurs, since the paradoxical process outlined above implies a failure of becoming.

### **To be a worm, what strength**

‘One louse meets another louse’, writes Beckett jestingly in a letter to a friend (*L3*, 347). ‘The first says: “Anything wrong?” The second: “I’m feeling man-y.”’ Whether lepidopteran, chironomid, or other, worms in Beckett are emblematic of indeterminacy, of being less-than-

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Rabaté, *Think, Pig!*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> P. D. Armitage, P. S. Cranston, and L. C. V. Pinder, *The Chironomidae: Biology and Ecology of Non-Biting Midges* (Dordrecht: Springer-Science and Business Media, 1995), 132.

fully human. From the misanthropic Murphy who appears a likeness of Bildad the Shuhite, known proponent of worm-theology, to Worm – the Unnamable’s final, senseless, denuded avatar – Beckett’s creatures have unmistakable affinity with worms.<sup>1</sup> Having crawled all his ‘lousy life...about in the mud’, Estragon would rather hear of the worms than scan the surroundings for familiar signs (CDW, 57). And the unnamed subject of *That Time* is said to have been ‘curled up [like] a worm in the slime’ without knowing ‘who [he was] from Adam’ (CDW, 390, 391) – a name that both intimates the remoteness of the first human and points to the lowly dust from which he sprang.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, between the epigraph of *Proust* (*‘e fango è il mondo’* [‘the world is mud’]) and the derisive ‘mud thou art’ of *Eh Joe* (CDW, 365) lies a mudscape often occupied by vermiform life that offers a correlative to the extreme *despicio sui* of Geulincxian humility.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, worms also populate *How It Is* and its drafts. In the ‘Pim’ notebook, Beckett twice jotted down the phrase ‘être un ver quelle force’ (‘to be a worm, what strength’), whose source he disclosed as Victor Hugo’s *L’Homme qui Rit* (CC, 200).<sup>4</sup> Among possible titles for the novel, Beckett toyed with using ‘Cher fruit cher [ver]’ – a phrase of Blakean feel that made it into the body of the text as ‘Dear bud dear worm’ (HII, 69).<sup>5</sup> In the published version, however, the most explicit intimation of Bom’s worm-like existence is provided by the image of a self-dividing slime-worm.

Beckett may have encountered ‘scissiparous’ in Georges Bataille’s *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (1957), where the word is used in its scientific sense to indicate the splitting of a single organism into two: ‘Let us call the original

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<sup>1</sup> See Job 25:4-6 for Bildad’s claim that man is a worm.

<sup>2</sup> The *OED* supplies the following: ‘perhaps related to ‘aḍamāh earth, ground (compare the juxtaposition of ‘aḍām and ‘aḍamāh in Genesis 2:7, where God forms man out of earth) or to ‘aḍom red, ruddy.’

<sup>3</sup> The epigraph to the 1931 edition of *Proust* is taken from Giacomo Leopardi’s poem, ‘A sé Stesso’.

<sup>4</sup> For an elucidating analysis of these references, see Adam Piette, ‘Torture, Text, Human Rights: *Comment C’est / How It Is* and the Algerian War’, in *Around 1945: Literature, Citizenship, Rights*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 153-155.

<sup>5</sup> Something of Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’ also seems shadowed in *Watt* (125): ‘One day the flower would be gone and only the worm remain, but on this particular day it was the flower that remained, and the worm that went.’

cell a, the two cells it turns into aa and aaa....'<sup>1</sup> In the novel, such bifurcation is dramatized on a small-scale in the eventual sundering between Bom and Pim. While together, their slime-covered bodies enter into a seemingly indistinguishable union: with limbs and lips overlapping, 'each one of us is at the same time Bom and Pim' (*III*, 122). Yet the abandon sees the one become two. On a larger scale, Bom ponders whether the sufferers may in fact not all be 'glued together in a vast imbrication of flesh without breach or fissure' (122), only to then consider a numerical divisibility (mirroring Bataille's 'aaa') by which the one becomes many.

This debt in itself is not interesting until we consider it alongside Max Nordau's conjunction between asexual reproduction and the worm-man. In a section from *Degeneration* that deals with 'retrogression', Nordau imagines the atavistic devolution of 'degenerate' members of the human species:

The relapse of the degenerate may reach to the most stupendous depth. As...he sinks somatically to the level of fishes, nay to that of the arthropoda, or, even further, to that of rhizopods not yet sexually differentiated; as by fistulae of the neck he reverts to the branchiae of the lowest fishes, the selacious; or...perhaps even of the bristles of worms; or, by hermaphrodisism, to the asexuality of rhizopods – so in the most favourable case, as a higher degenerate, he renews intellectually the type of primitive man of the most remote Stone Age; or, in the worst case, an idiot, that of an animal far inferior to man.<sup>2</sup>

Though Nordau is not explicitly alluded to in *How It Is*, his questionable social psychology presents a provocative counterpoint to evolutionary science and the 'natural history' Bom once knew. The passage gives Ernst Haeckel's recapitulation theory in reverse, whose abbreviated formula is 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'. Haeckel, a prominent nineteenth-

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York, NY: Walker and Company, 1962), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 556. It is worth pointing out that one characteristic of such degenerates, according to Nordau, is that they 'utter monosyllabic cries, instead of constructing grammatically and syntactically articulated sentences' (555).

century naturalist directly mentioned in *How It Is* (34), propounded the now-debunked ‘biogenetic law’ that an embryo ‘recapitulates’ the evolution of a species and thus resembles at various stages of gestation its remotest ancestors, including fish, amphibians, and reptiles.<sup>1</sup> Nordau’s own recapitulation, however, goes deeper in retracing a genetic devolution that has its baseline in vermiform and unicellular life. It is a debasing retrogression apposite to a novel in which the central character is mindful of ‘the animal kingdom beginning with the sponges’ (31).

Elsewhere, Nordau also suggests proximity between worms and degenerate humans. In a section from *Degeneration* that Beckett knew well, Nordau employs the image of a worm in building up to his theory of the ‘Ego-maniac’ – an individual unable to distinguish between the ‘I’ and the ‘not-I’:

Even among animals very much higher in the scale, and considerably more advanced in differentiation, a consciousness of the ‘Ego,’ properly so called, is inconceivable.... [C]an certain large worms...have an idea of their ‘Ego,’ when they neither feel nor recognize portions of their own bodies as constituent parts of their individuality, and begin to eat their tails when, by any accident in coiling themselves, it happens to lie in front of their mouths?<sup>2</sup>

Nordau’s worm offers a disconcertingly close parallel to the ouroboros imagined in *How It Is*: ‘our course a closed curve and let us be numbered 1 to 1000000 then number 1000000 on leaving his tormentor number 999999 instead of launching forth into the wilderness towards an inexistent victim proceeds towards number 1’ (102). More pertinent still is Nordau’s thoughts on consciousness that is prevented from attaining subjectivity. Not long after this passage we find a denunciation of the Ego-maniac, whose ‘nervous system is not normal’ and

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<sup>1</sup> For an elucidating discussion of Haeckel’s recapitulation theory in Beckett, see Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, *Theatre and Evolution from Ibsen to Beckett* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 246-247.

can therefore ‘scarcely [appreciate] or [perceive] the external world’.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the consciousness of the egomaniac fails to ascend from dim organic perception (*coenaesthesia*) of itself and its surroundings into the ‘clear consciousness of the Ego’, let alone towards consciousness of the ‘Not-I’.<sup>2</sup> This failure seems implicit in *How It Is*, where differentiation between tormentor and victim is not always clear: ‘through ignorance not realizing that Bem and Bom could only be one and the same’ (98).

In contradistinction to that of the Beckettian credo to actively ‘get back to ignorance’, the ignorance of the novel is the product of ontological degeneration.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, there is a gulf between the co-opting of *coenaesthesia* as a solipsistic device in the early work and the troubling deprivations enforced in the late novel. For the truly egomaniacal Belacqua, *coenaesthesia* is an ideal: ‘he flogged on his *coenaesthesia* to enwomb him, to exclude the bric-à-brac and expunge his consciousness’ (*Dream*, 123). In Bom’s case, however, *coenaesthesia* indexes the displacement and dehumanization he undergoes:

how I got here if it’s me...you are there somewhere alive somewhere vast stretch of time then it’s over you are there no more alive no more then again you are there again alive again it wasn’t over an error you begin again all over more or less in the same place or in another as when another image above in the light you come to in hospital in the dark (*III*, 16)

The passage has threefold reflexivity. First, it points to Bom’s phenomenological uncertainty discussed in the previous section (‘I know not what insect wound round its treasure I come back’) and so consolidates the upheaval of Darwin’s/Huber’s caterpillar and the undifferentiating consciousness of Nordau’s worm. The phrase ‘how I got here’ stands to experimental displacement as the phrase ‘if it’s me’ stands to desubjectification. Second, it anticipates the hospital scene with Pam Prim, in which shame functions to dissociate the ego

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<sup>1</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 253-254.

<sup>2</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, 249.

<sup>3</sup> ‘You’ve got to get back to ignorance.’ Beckett quoted in Atik, *How It Was*, 121.

from itself (essentially an affective coenaesthesia). And third, it recalls the coenaesthetic experiences of Belacqua in ‘Love and Lethe’, as discussed in Chapter 2, where Nordau’s term is associated with a patient’s gradual emergence from anaesthesia.<sup>1</sup> The difference in *How It Is*, however, is that discomfiting reanimation is an infernally repeating operation: ‘you are there again alive again’. As Bersani and Dutoit succinctly put it, the novel ‘diagrams a type of being (the being that is human) structured as the unending repetition of its own origination’.<sup>2</sup>

As with the *pretiosa margarita*, coenaesthesia in other parts of Beckett’s writing configures within that paradoxical impulse to attain plenitude through want. This is evident in the bratty ruminations of Belacqua, but also the more mature reflections of Beckett himself. Indeed, in a significant letter of 1937, the word is made to subserve in Beckett’s incipient preoccupation with the relinquishment of mastery:

The real consciousness is the chaos...with no premises or conclusions or problems or solutions or cases or judgements. I lie for days on the floor, or in the woods, accompanied & unaccompanied, in a *coenaesthesia of mind, a fullness of mental self-aesthesia* that is entirely useless.... I used to dig about in the mental sand for the lugworms of likes & dislikes, I do so no longer. The lugworms of understanding. (*LI*, 546, my emphasis)

Again, compared with Bom’s situation, this reads as a privileged experience of coenaesthesia. In fact, the equation of coenaesthesia and ‘fullness of mental-self aesthesia’ seems little more than a reformulation of Thomas à Kempis’s definition of heavenly wisdom as something ‘given up to forgetfulness’. So while Chris Ackerley is certainly right in saying that the term is important in ‘defining Beckett’s aesthetics of impotence and failure’, it is necessary to add that the term is also important in understanding the embodied impoverishment Bom and his like are subjected to.<sup>3</sup> The two functions should not be conflated, for this risks seeing *How It*

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch 2, 98-100.

<sup>2</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, 59.

<sup>3</sup> Ackerley, ‘Samuel Beckett and Max Nordau’, 172.

*Is* as a culmination of the Beckettian agenda rather than a confrontation of it. It also risks conflating the volitionally rejected ‘lugworms of understanding’ and an inescapable ‘scissiparous frenzy’. More succinctly still, it confuses the willed suffering of the ascetic and the inflicted torture of the damned.

### **Revictualling narrations: love, cruelty, and authorship**

Like that of the pearl, the implied image of the caterpillar has both intertextual and generative significance in *How It Is*. It invites thinking of Darwin, Huber, and Beckett’s earlier uses of the image, but also invites thinking beyond these. That is to say it prompts us to ask *how* the text’s internal operations mirror those of an insect forced to rework its foundations. What kind of residual embarrassment may be discovered in the undisguised echoes of earlier Beckett? What revision is implied? What tension can be traced between the old aporetics and the new? In this section I will discuss one instance by which *How It Is* opens itself dialogically to the single work most readily associated with Beckett’s fame, *Waiting for Godot*, and also to a source text that has paramount importance for his entire oeuvre, *The Divine Comedy*. In doing so, I want to shed light on the question of authorial cruelty.

Encountering the phrase ‘quaqua’ in the second fragment, the reader is presented with a familiar echo even before the strangeness of text has taken hold. We are reminded of Lucky’s speech in *Waiting for Godot*, whose opening theological hypothesis includes the twice-repeated ‘quaquaquaqua’ (CDW, 42). The uncanniness is not only produced by the verbal repetition but also by a comparable performativity. Where the play’s stage directions call Lucky’s utterings a ‘text’ and so implies some kind of recitation, the narrator of *How It Is* likewise reproduces words from a source of uncertain origin: ‘how it was I quote...voice once without quaqua on all sides then in me when the panting stops tell me again finish

telling me invocation' (*HII*, 3).<sup>1</sup> A third overlap is scatology. Lucky's 'quaquaquaqua' issues from the halls and textbooks of the 'Acacacacademy'; Bom's 'quaqua' sounds within a sea of excrement.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant parallel, however, is the texts' respective critiques of providential order and justice. In *Waiting for Godot*, Lucky's speech serves to ridicule the idea of a 'personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard...who loves us dearly'. During the play's Berlin rehearsals in 1975, Beckett explained that Lucky is trying to say 'quaversalis' – a term that 'concerns a god who turns himself in all directions at the same time' (*TNSBI*, 133). Lucky's failure to pronounce this word for divine ubiquity correlates thematically with the characters' failure to experience it. As for justice, the choric repetition of 'nothing to be done' (expressly repeated in *How It Is* in a reflection on justice [108]) dogs any momentary effort to alter the conditions of existence.

The 'quaqua' of *How It Is* also signals an unrealised 'quaversalis'. But where *Waiting for Godot* derides naïve belief in a beneficent Other, *How It Is* attacks the notion of a beneficent author. This distinction is not always easy to make, particularly because Bom often draws on religious language in his existential hypotheses. In Part 3, where his efforts to understand the conditions of his damnation are most trenchant, he posits the 'need of one not one of us an intelligence somewhere a love who all along the track at the right places according as we need them deposits our sacks' (*HII*, 120). This speculative imagining of a grand deviser also intersects with Lucky's speech. First, there is the suggestion of a disembodied presence. Lucky's god is 'without extension' while Bom's god has gone from being an overseeing eye, to an overhearing ear, to an abstract intelligence; in both cases there is thus intimation of a godlike entity paring his nails above the chaos. Second, the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Bom's quotation, see Peter Fifield, *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 125-126.

<sup>2</sup> The conflation of existential and verbal excrement is also present in *Texts for Nothing* and *The Unnamable*. For a discussion, see Yoshiki Tajiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 51.



‘quaversality’ of Bom’s god is borne out by his pervasive distribution of sacks among the damned. This, in turn, speaks to a third similarity: the notion that such a distribution is the expression of a divine love.

Love seems intertwined with suffering and cruelty throughout the novel. We encounter the image of a mother’s ‘eyes burn[ing] with severe love’ (10); Bom’s mutilation of Pim somehow constitutes an act of ‘stoic love’ (53); and there is a vague causality between Bom’s and Pam Prim’s efforts to revive their love-making and the latter’s defenestration. Yet the most complex instance of the paradoxical conjunction of love and torment is offered by an embedded allusion to the inscription on Hell’s Gate in *Inferno* 3, which declares the woes of the damned to be devised by Godly justice, wisdom, and love: ‘Justice inspired my high exalted Maker; / I was created by the Might Divine, The highest Wisdom and the primal Love. /.../ All hope abandon, ye that enter here!’<sup>1</sup>

For Beckett, these lines were fraught because of their ethical rather than theological implications. The question implicit in *How It Is* (but also in the earliest works) concerns both Dante’s lack of humility in creating a cosmological scheme of judgement and his cruelty in inventing attendant tortures. Beckett’s awareness of and possible complicity in such perverse pride is neatly captured in ‘A Wet Night’, where the Alba perceives an unflattering likeness between Belacqua and Dante:

Surveying him as he stood bedraggled under the lintel, clutching his enormous glasses..., bothered seriously in his mind by a neat little point that had arisen out of nowhere in the *vestibule*, waiting no doubt for some kind friend to lead him to a seat, the Alba thought she had never seen anybody, man or woman, look quite such a sovereign booby. Seeking to be God, she thought, in the slavish arrogance of a piffing evil. (*MPTK*, 69-70, my emphasis)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Inf.* 3.4-9.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the corresponding passage in *Dream*, 233. ‘A Wet Night’ renders the allusion to Dante more clearly.

In *How It Is*, the milieu of *Inferno* 3 is more obliquely evoked. Bom's 'pearl of forlorn solace' comes to him in a place resembling 'outer hell' or 'vestibule', as the French more pointedly renders it (CC, 52).<sup>1</sup> Like Dante's damned, he indulges in coprolalia and 'mute imprecations' against God, and also waves a 'vast banner' resembling that blank flag pursued by the shades in this canto (*III*, 34, 29).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Pim's 'vile tears' (64) appear to have some affinity with the lachrymose worm-fodder of Ante-Inferno.<sup>3</sup> However, the evidence most pertinent to a question of cruel love are those broken echoes of the most famous words in all of *The Divine Comedy*: 'mute screams abandon hope'; 'abandoned here effect of hope'; 'the abandoned arrow effect of hope' (39, 40).

If Bom retains only the last verse of the inscription on Hell's Gate, he nevertheless abides under the full weight of its authority. Divine love and divine retribution are consolidated in a justice that simultaneously sustains and deprives life. The mud epitomises this duality: it quenches thirst and restores species belonging only to perpetuate a dehumanizing process of excrement consumption. The same may be said for the sack. As Bom remarks, it is 'thanks to my sack that I keep dying in a dying age' (12).<sup>4</sup> This would explain his strange claim that he 'clutches it at arm's length as he the window-sill who falls out of the window' (56). Throughout the novel, humanity seems dependent on a deliberate 'hanging on'; or, conversely, falling implies a loss of species. But the distance Bom maintains to the sack – arm's length – also betrays its more menacing function.

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<sup>1</sup> The vestibule is the zone populated by the *ignavi* and cowards such as Pope Celestine V, with whose 'grand refusal' Beckett was taken (*L2*, 240). In the early poem, 'Malacoda', Beckett also imagines a scene in the 'vestibule' (*CP*, 21).

<sup>2</sup> For Dante's reference to this banner, see *Inf.*3.52-57. As for 'coprolalia', Beckett copied the word alongside '(mucktalk)' into his *Dream* notebook (97) while reading Nordau's *Degeneration*. Nordau credits Gilles de la Tourette with the neologism and defines it as 'obsessional explosions of blasphemies and obscenities'. Nordau, *Degeneration*, 499.

<sup>3</sup> This image is reworked in the poem 'Text 3': 'Worms breed in the red tears' (*CP*, 39).

<sup>4</sup> Compare Molloy's predicament (*TN*, 18): 'I was on my way to my mother, whose charity kept me dying.' Also relevant is Malone's cynicism (*TN*, 245-246): 'There is a providence for impotent old men, to the end. And when they cannot swallow any more someone rams a tube down their gullet, or up their rectum, and fills them full of vitaminized pap, so as not to be accused of murder.'

Consider the pharmakon-like ambivalence in the following statement: ‘our unfailing rations...enable us to advance without pause or rest’ (122). Being unable yet carrying on is transformed from ethos to punitive decree; it is stripped of even the faintest hint of heroism and endowed instead with futility that sinisterly reflects on the creator of its conditions. The recycled phrase from *The Unnamable*, discussed above and also discernible in the last quotation, may be read less as an axiom of Beckett’s art than an indictment against it.<sup>1</sup> Here is no triumph against the odds but rather a coercion of the impossible which stands surprisingly yet starkly against the coercion enacted within the novel. (Bom says that he will not ask Pim to ‘do the impossible’ [55].) Unable to go on and yet impelled to do so – mobilized at the price of all respite – Bom has even less freedom than the Geulincxian subject who can at least easterly pace the deck of a west-bound ship.<sup>2</sup> He numbers in a procession of bodies moving not westward (‘death in the west as a rule’) but eastward, towards perpetual rebirth in suffering: ‘all advance from west to east year in year out in the dark the mud in torment and solitude’ (107, 109).

Given these conditions, it is difficult to share Alain Badiou’s optimism about the novel’s universality and his belief that ‘reduced to a few functions, humanity is only more admirable, more energetic, more immortal’.<sup>3</sup> Badiou is justifiably reluctant to read the text plainly as a piece of political commentary.<sup>4</sup> But in place of one allegory he posits another which draws a parallel between the novel’s debasements and the human condition at large. Apart from the note of triumphalism, this sentiment is problematic in its readiness to self-identify with the text’s sufferers. Such a neatness of identification not only courts the danger

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<sup>1</sup> As such it accords with Adorno’s reflections on lateness and self-repetition: ‘the empty phrase is set in place as a monument to what has been – a monument in which subjectivity petrified.’ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 126.

<sup>2</sup> See Ch 4, 155-157, for my earlier discussion of this image in Geulincx. Geulincx’s intertextual presence is explicitly suggested by the phrase ‘all self to be abandoned say nothing when nothing’, which rehearses the *ubi nihil vales* imperative as well as the Third Obligation of the *Ethics*: ‘to abandon myself, and deliver myself entirely into God’s hands’. Geulincx, *Ethics*, 72, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> For a compelling argument about *How It Is* as a response to the Algerian War, see again Adam Piette, ‘Torture, Text, Human Rights’.

of nullifying humiliation as an individuating experience (addressed in Chapter 4), but it also brushes aside the text's tacit corrosion of the ideas about even-handed justice. One might argue that the cycle of suffering or the 'quantum of wantum' is constant in the novel since all tormentors are eventually also victims. But this is to take in good faith that Bom gets his comeuppance in the apocryphal Part 4 and also to regard such circuitous vengeance as balanced.<sup>1</sup> More significantly, it is to neglect questions raised about notions of authorial cruelty.

These questions cluster most visibly around the third example of the providence/punishment dichotomy: narrative itself.

and this anonymous voice self-styled quack the voice of us all that was without on all sides then in us when the panting stops...it is at last the voice of him who before listening to us murmur what we are tells us what we are as best he can

...

of him who God knows who could blame him must sometimes wonder if to these perpetual revictualings narrations and auditions he might not put an end without ceasing to maintain us in some kind of being without end and some kind of justice without flaw who could blame him (*HII*, 122)

The revivifying properties of story-telling are hardly without precedent in Beckett. The narrator of 'The Calmative', for instance, tries to assuage his angst by telling a story and then wonders if it is 'possible that in this story I have come back to life, after my death?' (*CSP*, 61). Similarly, Malone's tales about Sapo and others serve to delay his dying. And in *Endgame*, Nagg is promised a sugar-plum on condition that he submit to an 'audition' of Hamm's 'chronicle' (*CDW*, 116). But stories can also be mortifying – a penum or labour, as

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<sup>1</sup> It is also hard to sympathise with David Kleinberg-Levin's optimistic reading that the novel offers 'a strong protest against the ancient conception of justice as revenge'. Kleinberg-Levin, *Beckett's Words: The Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 243. By contrast, Paul Sheehan convincingly argues that it is impossible to absorb the novel's cruelties into a valorising narrative. See Sheehan, 'A World without Monsters: Beckett and the Ethics of Cruelty', in *Beckett and Ethics*, ed. Russell Smith (London: Continuum, 2008), 99-100.

both Molloy and the Unnamable know, that cruelly defers a final rest (*TN*, 27, 308). *How It Is* consolidates these extremes. It also nuances the motif of ‘narrative revictualings’ by framing the story of ‘how it is’ as externally sourced rather than internally generated. The effect, on the one hand, is to deprive the sufferers’ agency; on the other, it draws attention to the ‘love’ or ‘intelligence’ that conceives such deprivation.

A categorical difference thus arises between the novel’s hellish conditions and the creation of its hellish conditions. In other words, where both the elemental mud (*caca*) and the sack represent means to reduce and restore humanity, the constitutive voice (‘self-styled quaqu’) represents the arbiter of such infernal contingencies. It is this voice that tells ‘how it is’. It is this voice which, like the Hell-devising Love in Dante, renders torment and existence interchangeable. I have discussed Beckett’s almost dogmatic belief in life-as-expiation in Chapter 4, so it suffices to say that *How It Is* varies the theme by reflexively considering the author’s hand in creating yet another world where this dogma inheres.<sup>1</sup> Bom’s rhetorical question – ‘who could blame him’ – is not nearly as exculpatory as it seems. In conjunction with his poignant, almost Christ-like, hope that this cup of suffering might pass otherwise, the question insinuates the arbitrariness of ‘justice’. It registers a reflexive poignancy similar to the speaker of the eighth ‘Text for Nothing’, who desperately asks: ‘But whom can I have offended so grievously, to be punished in this inexplicable way, all is inexplicable, space and time, false and inexplicable, suffering and tears, and even the old convulsive cry, It’s not me, it can’t be me’ (*CSP*, 133).

*How It Is* takes up the same question but goes further in exposing the hand behind the benighted kindnesses in Beckett’s work. The zero-sum games between Hamm and Clov, Molloy and his mother, the narrator of ‘The End’ and an anonymous charitable soul all partake of a blessing-as-curse logic but are nonetheless endemic to the fictional realm

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<sup>1</sup> See Ch 4, 154-155.

presented.<sup>1</sup> Taken together they might be read as symptomatic of the human condition, or as a critique of belief in transcendental benevolence (Lucky's speech, for instance). But *How It Is* seems to shift the coordinates in order to ask not how we can claim goodness for God in the face of all suffering, but whether authors are responsible for the cruelties of their invention:

and if it may seem strange that without food to sustain us we can drag ourselves thus by mere grace of our united net sufferings from west to east towards an inexistent peace we are invited kindly to consider

that for the likes of us and no matter how we are recounted there is more nourishment in a cry nay a sigh torn from one whose only good is silence or in speech extorted from one at last delivered from its use than sardines can ever offer (125-126)

Given what we know about the mud and sacks, about their double-bindedness, it is perhaps not so strange that the creatures of this realm are vitalized by a cruelty which, in due course, will also mortify them. What is strange, however, is that these two fragments form part of a grouping that reads as the single most eloquent section of the entire novel. Apart from the consistently absent punctuation, it bears no trace of the interruptive scraps that unsettle reading elsewhere. Instead, we are presented with a passage of astounding cogency comparable in its unexpectedness to Lucky's thinking. So if we are kindly invited to consider that anguish sustains the denizens of this mudscape, we are also invited by this abrupt change of style to consider the hand responsible for the rules of this realm. In essence, Beckett tempts us with a kind of reverse formalist reading: having become familiar with a language that declares its literariness through defamiliarization, we are suddenly confronted with a flow of

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<sup>1</sup> Also relevant is the cruel generosity of Hamm who threatens to give Clov just enough food to keep him from starving utterly (*CDW*, 95), or the 'charity' of Molloy's mother which – like Bom's sack – 'kept [him] dying' (*TN*, 18).

words that, in their relatively straightforward communicativeness, achieve what Victor Shklovsky called the ‘de-automizing [of] perception’.<sup>1</sup>

Considered a different way, this brief fluency draws attention not only to the novel’s impoverished syntax of penury but also to its impoverished ethics. And in tandem with the metafictional manoeuvres that declare the arbitrary nature of the novel’s ‘realism’ – the mud, the sack, the apparent temporal linearity – this fluency calls out to the reader to see the author in his guise as ethically dubious creator, an author ‘seeking to be God...in the slavish arrogance of a piffling evil’. Like Bom, we have only the text – the quaqu – to rely on. And so, like him – and like the damned in Dante’s Hell – we do not encounter any explicit contradiction of the notion that the creatures of the mudscape ‘have their being in justice’ (108). But the novel’s deliberate declarations of arbitrariness, its revision of old foundations, its naked presentation of cruelty without apparent cause, constitute those ironizing gestures that make up the late or kenotic work.

### **Proud priest or humble ascetic?**

In his acerbic review, John Updike cast Beckett as a ‘proud priest perfecting his forlorn ritual’.<sup>2</sup> As with his claim that *How It Is* offers little more than a variation on a well-worn theme, the implicit charge is not easily dismissed. For it is hard to disagree that there is something proud, even arrogant, in the writing of a novel that not only demands impossible patience from readers but also great familiarity with the prior body of work. No less may one find something alienating in the remoteness of this author who, perhaps more like a martyr than a priest, took delight in the novel’s unreadability.<sup>3</sup> Yet to level these criticisms is to

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Shklovsky, *Victor Shklovsky: A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2017), 93.

<sup>2</sup> In Graver and Federman, *The Critical Heritage*, 285.

<sup>3</sup> See L3, 525: ‘Improved C.C. a bit I think and caught up on some bad slips, but it remains unreadable which is a great beauty.’

overlook the unflinching effort of self-emptying behind *How It Is*. It is to take in bad faith the novel's ascetic winnowing of style, of intertextuality, of authorial afflatus, as proof of the author's pride. A humbler reading, perhaps, means recognizing Beckett's sincere effort to achieve level – or perhaps better, levelled – standing between his language and his will: 'I hammer and hammer. Hard as iron, the words. I'd like them in dust. Like the spirit' (L3, 335).



## Afterword

During Christ's Sermon on the Mount in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* there is some confusion as to who exactly will inherit the earth. Standing at the rear of the multitude, a group of squabblers is confounded that one particular Greek should be the lucky heir. It soon dawns that they had misheard: 'Oh, it's the meek! Blessed are the meek! Oh, that's nice, isn't it? I'm glad they're getting something, 'cause they have a hell of a time.'<sup>1</sup> Irreverent and impish, the humour has a Beckettian flavour. And like Beckett's jokes, it leaves us laughing with a certain uneasiness. Who exactly is the butt of the joke? Are the meek those of self-effacing disposition or are they the down-trodden of society? Are they the humble or the humiliated?

As I have argued, the distinction between humility and humiliation is not always clear, nor is the causal relation between them a straightforward matter. On the one hand, humility may be an attitude that encourages patient submission to different kinds of humiliation. As William Ian Miller puts it: 'Humility might be supposed to be that virtue which accepts the possibility of suffering humiliation for one's humility but accepts such suffering calmly as one's due.'<sup>2</sup> On the other, humiliation may be a condition or experience that cultivates the meekness extolled in the beatitudes.

In turning to the works of Eliot and Beckett, the conceptual and semantic variance is made no simpler. For Eliot, humility is fundamentally a matter of right belief, of acknowledging one's place in the eternal scheme. This is true in 1917 when Eeldrop voices the inescapability of the individual soul before absolute laws. It is similarly true, after 1927, when the value of goodwill is determined in relation to the correctness of conviction. Personally, Eliot affirmed that 'the Christian scheme seemed the only possible scheme which

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<sup>1</sup> *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, dir. Terry Jones (1979; UK: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, *Humiliation*, 147-148.

found a place for values which I must maintain or perish (and *belief comes first and practice second*), the belief, for instance, in holy living and holy dying, in sanctity, chastity, humility, austerity' (*CP4*, 428, my emphasis). In his turn, Beckett could 'understand...humility in terms of "there but for the grace of G." or "there but for the disgrace of this old bastard", humility before the doomed & the assumed' (*L1*, 228). But in his writing, humility is most often a product of humiliation. This is glimpsed in the vagabond of 'Walking Out', in Estragon's quiet acceptance of his existential embarrassment, and in the voice of *Worstward Ho* that registers the agony of his bones but is determined to go on kneeling: 'Forever kneeling. Better forever kneeling. Better worse forever kneeling' (*Com etc.*, 86-87). For Beckett himself, to fly between humiliation and humility 'was not to fly far':

...I can see nothing for us but the old earth turning onward and time feasting on our suffering along with the rest. Somewhere at the heart of the gales of grief (and of love too, I've been told) already they have blown themselves out. I was always grateful for that *humiliating consciousness* and it was always there I huddled, in the innermost place of *human frailty and lowliness*. To fly there for me was not to fly far.... (*L3*, 119, my emphasis)

In my Introduction, I briefly hinted that Eliot's and Beckett's respective use of Julian of Norwich gives us some idea of their different handling of humility and humiliation. But perhaps a better near coming-together is the imperfect likeness between two of their suffering heroines, Celia and Winnie. At the 1949 premier of *The Cocktail Party*, audiences at the Edinburgh Festival witnessed what would become an apocryphal spectacle. Instead of merely having her demise reported (as it is in the published version), Celia Coplestone's martyrdom was showcased in horrific detail: crucified on top of an anthill, her face had been smeared with a type of grease intended to attract the ants.<sup>1</sup> Twelve years later, in 1961, Beckett would fix *Happy Days*'s Winnie up to her waist in sand, where she would laugh and subsequently

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Sencourt, *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir* (London: Garnstone Press, 1971), 160.

shudder at the presence of an emmet carrying an egg. Beckett explained that '[t]he eggs contain the promise of swarming (devouring) ants to come. This shd. be remembered in Act II when she no longer has arms to defend herself with.'<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Albright, who first noticed this indirect correspondence, writes that 'Winnie suffers Eliotesque, or Dantesque, torture' and that the play contains traces of the morality play.<sup>2</sup> I think Albright is right in pointing to Dantesque vestiges, though one must be mindful of the play's mockery of transcendental meaning, whether beyond life or beyond the text:

What's the idea? he says – stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground – course fellow – What does it mean? he says – What's it meant to mean? – and so on – lot more stuff like that – usual drivell.... And you, she says, what's the idea of you, she says, what are you meant to mean? (*CDW*, 156)

The answer to the latter question ultimately separates Celia and Winnie. Gruesome though it may be, Celia's death has a clear meaning: she has chosen to atone for her sin through a conscious submission of her will to that of God. Her martyrdom is in keeping with the voluntary suffering of Dante's penitents. As Eliot remarked, '[t]he souls in purgatory suffer because they *wish to suffer*, for purgation' (*CP3*, 716). By contrast, Winnie's purgatory is like the purgatory Beckett defined in relation to Joyce: there is no culmination, 'and a step forward is, by definition, a step back' (*Dis*, 33). The difference between the two plays and between the humiliation of its sufferers may effectively be distilled as *chosen* and *given* suffering. For Eliot, humiliation is sometimes a necessary component in Christian humility; for Beckett, humiliation is a fact of being to which one can respond in humility. But while their ways up and ways down might not be the same, there is between the two authors a comparable insistence that humility does not imply going gently.

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett in Daniel Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics*, 72.

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